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*Disputes in the “metaphysics” of ethico-political transformation:  
a re-assessment of the speculative philosophies of Jacques Derrida  
and Emmanuel Levinas*

A thesis submitted to Middlesex University  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

My thesis contests a putative congruity between Derrida and Levinas concerning discussions of responsibility, ethics and otherness. It attends to the fundamental 'metaphysical' differences between the two with respect to ontology, language and historicity. Consequently, it foregrounds two distinct conceptions of philosophy, which differ with respect to task, strategy and presentational form.

Since Levinas's key notion of the 'face' [*le visage*], which cannot be equated to any actual countenance, breaks with phenomenality – no small issue for an avowed phenomenology – this thesis will begin by treating the category of the other (or Other) in Levinas's writings as a *conundrum*. By analysing the two major topographies of the Other developed by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* (with particular attention to their differences), I ask: who or what counts as the other for Levinas?

Concurrently, I track Derrida's writings across his career to see if he can be held to subscribe to *either* of these models, noting the transformations that Derrida effects upon Levinas. By analysing them in tandem, the metaphysical and speculative contours of both thinkers (which if not neglected in the secondary literature are transformed into quasi-theological positions) come to the fore.

Thereby, this thesis seeks to revive questions of speculative thought in contemporary philosophy, whilst simultaneously asking how this speculative dimension preserves its status as philosophy despite its break with norms of written form and argumentation. Crucially, this is the terrain on which Derrida, in 'Violence and Metaphysics', had first criticised Levinas – his lack of attention to language and presentation meant his writing remained *non-philosophical*.

‘... exteriority and alterity are concepts which themselves have never surprised philosophical discourse. *Philosophy by itself has always been concerned* with them. These are not conceptual headings under which philosophy’s border can be overflowed: the overflow is its object. Instead of determining some other circumscription, recognizing it, practicing it, bringing it to light, forming it, in a word *producing* it (and today this word serves as the crudest “new clothes” of the metaphysical denigration which accommodates itself very well to all these projects), in question will be, but according to a movement unheard of by philosophy, an other which is no longer *its other*.’

Jacques Derrida ‘Tympan’ [1972] translated by Alan Bass in *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1982), pp. ix-xxix; pp. xiii-xiv.

‘As has often been remarked, one of the gravest misfortunes that can affect a writer of great intellectual seriousness and strong ethical passions is to have his ideas “naturalized” by the English.’

Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin *Wittgenstein’s Vienna* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1973), p. 19.



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Andrew McGettigan

March 2006

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## Abbreviations

### Derrida

<i>Adieu</i>	<i>Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas</i> , 1999
<i>ATVM</i>	‘At this Very Moment in this Work Here I Am’, 1991
<i>Cosmo</i>	‘On Cosmopolitanism’, 2001
<i>FoL</i>	‘Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundation of Authority”’, 2002
<i>GD</i>	<i>The Gift of Death</i> , 1995
<i>Gramm</i>	<i>Of Grammatology</i> , 1997
<i>Origin</i>	‘Introduction to <i>The Origin of Geometry</i> ’, 1989
<i>OG</i>	‘Introduction à ‘L’Origine de la géométrie’ de Husserl’, 1999
<i>Ousia</i>	‘ <i>Ousia</i> and <i>Grammē</i> : Note on a Note from <i>Being and Time</i> ’, 1982
<i>Passions</i>	‘ <i>Passions</i> : ‘An Oblique Offering’’, 1995
<i>PoF</i>	<i>The Politics of Friendship</i> , 1997
<i>Rogues</i>	<i>Rogues: Two Essays on Reason</i> , 2005
<i>SP</i>	<i>Speech and Phenomena</i> , 1973
<i>VM</i>	‘Violence and Metaphysics’, 1978

### Levinas

<i>AqE</i>	<i>Autrement qu’Etre</i> , 1978
<i>BPW</i>	<i>Basic Philosophical Writings</i> , 1996
<i>DEwH</i>	<i>Discovering Existence with Husserl</i> , 1998
<i>E&amp;E</i>	<i>Existence and Existents</i> , 1988
<i>Enigma</i>	‘Enigma and Phenomenon’, 1996
<i>E&amp;I</i>	<i>Ethics and Infinity</i> , 1985
<i>JTT</i>	‘Jewish Thought Today’, 1990
<i>MS</i>	‘Meaning and Sense’, 1996
<i>OtB</i>	<i>Otherwise than Being</i> , 1991
<i>Tel</i>	<i>Totalité et Infini</i> , 1971
<i>TI</i>	<i>Totality &amp; Infinity</i> , 1969
<i>T&amp;O</i>	<i>Time and the Other</i> , 1987
<i>WhO</i>	‘Wholly Otherwise’, 1991

## Abbreviations

### Caygill

*L&P*                      *Levinas and the Political*, 2002

### Critchley

*ED*                      *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). 1999

### Hobson

*OL*                      *Jacques Derrida – Opening Lines*, 1998

### Husserl

*CM*                      *Cartesian Meditations*, 1960

*Crisis*                      *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 1970

*FTL*                      *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, 1969

*Krisis*                      *Husserliana Band VI: Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendente Phänomenologie*, 1954

*PITC*                      *Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, 1964

*PRS*                      ‘Philosophy as Rigorous Science’, 1965

*Ursprung*                      ‘The Origin of Geometry’, 1989

*Vienna*                      ‘The Vienna Lecture’, 1970

### Sartre

*BN*                      *Being and Nothingness*, 1991



## Introduction

### Derrida, Levinas and the question of influence

Something of a consensus dominates the reception of Jacques Derrida's late works. They have been taken to mark an 'ethico-political' turn, determined by questions and concerns absent from the earlier work on deconstruction and grammatology. Moreover, this change has been ascribed to the positive impact of Emmanuel Levinas, to the extent that some see Derrida's later writings as "*Levinasian*".

Such an interpretation has been challenged by Derrida himself on several occasions. In 2003, in an interview given to the French publication, *Magazine Littéraire*, having marked his distance from Levinas<sup>1</sup>, he warned against an increasingly prevalent, facile reception of him as the thinker of the ethical response to the other, or of ethics as first philosophy. Because, primarily, this reception does not appreciate the enormous transformation that the concept of ethics undergoes in his works.

*'... l'œuvre de Lévinas est en train de passer, fort tard dans son histoire, au rang de référence facile, voire de caution commune. Mais il y a un prix à payer pour ce qui ressemble parfois à une instrumentalisation idéologique, voire démagogique et dépolitisante de la métaphysique de Lévinas, de ce qu'il appelle, lui, «métaphysique», «philosophie première» ou «éthique», par opposition à l'ontologie. La référence à l'Autre devient facile et incantatoire, et je trouve de plus en plus fastidieuse et bien-pensante l'expression «rapport à l'autre» ou «respect de l'autre». On assaisonne ces mots d'un salut verbal et paresseux à Lévinas, pour passer la douane du sérieux et de l'audace philosophique avec un argument d'autorité, et le tour est joué. Le mot «éthique» tient parfois le même rôle.<sup>2</sup>*

'Levinas's work is in the process of passing, quite late in its history, to the level of facile reference, even communal surety. But there is a price to pay for what sometimes resembles an ideological (or even possibly demagogic and depoliticising) instrumentalization of his metaphysics, which Levinas himself called "metaphysics", "first philosophy", or "ethics", in opposition

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<sup>1</sup> 'D'ailleurs le chiasme dont il [Levinas] parle, le «cœur du chiasme», je ne sais pas – je suis moins sûr que jamais à ce sujet – s'il donne lieu à du «contact» ...'. 'Besides, regarding the chiasmus of which he spoke, the 'heart of the chiasmus', I don't know – I am less sure than ever on this point – whether it gave rise to any contact [between us] ...' Jacques Derrida & Alain David (interview) 'Derrida avec Levinas' *Magazine Littéraire* 419 (April 2003), pp. 30-34; p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> op. cit. pp. 32-33.



## Introduction – Derrida, Levinas and the question of influence

to “ontology”. The reference to the Other is becoming facile and incantatory; more and more I find tedious and commonplace the expressions “relation with the other” or “respect for the other”. One spices these words ([belonging to] a lazy, verbal exchange) with Levinas, in order to pass through the border control of philosophical seriousness and originality with an argument from authority, and the game is up. The word “ethics” sometimes plays the same role.’ [my translation]

Although the French context for this interview differs from that of Levinas’s English-language reception, the same enthusiasm for ethics and the Other also evades the serious business of analysing Levinas’s metaphysics. This ‘body of sentimental commentary’, of hagiographic exposition, has begun to be broken by the work of Stéphane Mosès<sup>3</sup>, Stella Sandford<sup>4</sup>, Rudi Visker<sup>5</sup> and Howard Caygill<sup>6</sup>. Each attempts to displace a well-meaning but anaemic ethics, well-suited to the familiar philosophical categories, with a more systematic, more challenging and perhaps more sober reading.

This endeavour will be extended here by analysing the two major topographies of the Other developed by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*<sup>7</sup> and *Otherwise than Being*<sup>8</sup> with particular attention to their differences. Concurrently, I will track Derrida’s writings across his career to see if he can be held to subscribe to *either* of these models, noting the *transformations* that Derrida effects upon Levinas and his own reference to Levinas’s *œuvre* as a ‘mutation’<sup>9</sup>. By analysing them in tandem, and paying close regard to points of disputation, the metaphysical and speculative contours of both thinkers (which if not *neglected* in the secondary literature are transformed into quasi-theological positions) come to the fore. It

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<sup>3</sup> *Au-delà de la guerre: trios études sur Levinas* (Paris & Tel Aviv, Éditions de l’éclat, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> *The Metaphysics of Love: Gender and Transcendence in Levinas* (London & New Brunswick, The Athlone Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> *Truth and Singularity: Taking Foucault into Phenomenology* (Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> *Levinas and the Political* (London & New York, Routledge, 2002). Hereafter references given in the text as *L&P* followed by page reference.

<sup>7</sup> *Totality & Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* [1961] translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969). Hereafter abbreviated to *TI* followed by page reference.

<sup>8</sup> *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* [1978] translated by Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991). Hereafter abbreviated to *OtB* followed by page reference.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* [1997] translated by Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 12 & p. 31. Hereafter abbreviated to *Adieu* followed by page reference.



## Introduction – Derrida, Levinas and the question of influence

will be shown that Derrida is an astute, sympathetic and rigorous reader of Levinas, but that the common understanding of this relationship is at best limited – deformed by received, uncritical conceptions of philosophy and its task. My investigation begins with the notion of influence underlying those attributions of an ‘ethico-political turn’. What does it mean to present Derrida as ‘influenced’ by Levinas?

### What philosophical work does the concept of influence do?

In general, the notion of the influence of one author over another, or an affinity between two writers, is only vaguely understood in the context of philosophical claims. Even in a certain historicist understanding of intellectual history, the work done by these concepts has been questioned.

Quentin Skinner sees in the concern to identify influences a ‘scholar’s game’ that is nearly devoid of explanatory power<sup>10</sup>.

‘The function of isolating what are thought to be leading influences and tracing out connections in terms of them is certainly clear enough: it seems a good means of abridging the enormous range of facts with which an historian or social scientist is typically confronted. The philosophical status of this activity, however, is by no means so self-evidently clear ...’<sup>11</sup>

He analyses what he takes to be two distinct forms of claims to influence: the first where one author ( $P_2$ ), historically later, explicit refers to another ( $P_1$ ) as an influence – a relation of testimony; the second where a historian establishes a connection between the two by dint of research.

For Skinner, testimonials *per se* are insufficient to support any substantive claim of influence. There is no procedure by which to decide between different explanations of this testimony without separate historical research which establishes any such connection independently. It is important to note, that, for Skinner, any claim to influence, must be doing more than claim that  $P_2$  is *paraphrasing* or *adopting* certain terms from  $P_1$ : ‘The judgment that  $P_1$

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Limits of Historical Explanations’ *Philosophy* xli (1966), pp. 199-215.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p. 203.

## Introduction – Derrida, Levinas and the question of influence

influenced  $P_2$  seems in effect to entail that we see repeated in  $P_2$  the elements which also give to  $P_1$  its *characteristic form*.’<sup>12</sup> [my emphasis]

‘Influence’ is used rather loosely in philosophical literature and is often simply meant as a figure of speech or a gesture towards some unspecified connection. But if such a claim is to do philosophical *work*, it is important to specify what sort of evidential structures could *demonstrate* such claims. That is, what is the point of attesting to a ‘mutual fecundation’ between Derrida and Levinas<sup>13</sup>? How does such a claim work if it is not simply a figure of speech?

On Skinner’s understanding and argument, the problem of such a claim for influence is that it is hard-pressed to overcome alternative explanations, particularly *coincidence* or a general milieu of thought that both authors share<sup>14</sup>.

Skinner’s three conditions for ‘influence’ to explain the appearance of a particular doctrine in a particular author are:

1. One should be able to demonstrate a ‘general similarity’ between the ‘characteristic forms’ in question.
2. These features should not be attributable to any third party or a general ‘cultural milieu’.
3. Any influence must be *demonstrably* non-random and feasible.

Although he slightly revises these conclusions in the later essay, ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’<sup>15</sup>, he maintains that, if not as impossible as he previously thought, the demonstration of influence is ‘elusive’ and rarely

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pp. 205-7.

<sup>13</sup> This unpleasant metaphor is my rendering of Salomon Malka’s *mutuelle fécondation*. ‘Un parcours philosophique’ *Magazine Littéraire* 419 (April 2003); pp. 22-27.

<sup>14</sup> Connections between two figures ‘... represent only two items out of an aggregate which is not merely immensely large, but in which it is excluded (it has been seen) that the historian could ever be in a position to improve the standing of his claims by performing any of the repeated or controlled experiments which a scientist in similar difficulties might typically undertake.’ [op. cit. p. 208]

<sup>15</sup> ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’ in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* edited by J. Tully (Oxford, Blackwell, 1988); pp. 29-67.



## Introduction – Derrida, Levinas and the question of influence

works. He thinks it ‘scarcely an exaggeration’ to state that the ‘... whole repertoire of *Einfluss*-studies in the history of ideas is based on nothing better than the capacity of the observer to foreshorten the past by filling it with his own reminiscences.’<sup>16</sup>

However, if one suspends both the aim of identifying who had certain thoughts first and the argument that certain themes occur in author X *because* she read book Y, then there is an important philological concern here: whether we have an adequate comprehension of those texts *in the first instance*. And whether there is not always a certain tacit dimension of influence informing the assumptions brought to bear on a text.

The relevance of this idea can be presented through reflection on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s citation practice.

‘How far my efforts agree with those of other philosophers I will not decide. Indeed what I have written here makes no claim to novelty in points of detail; and therefore I give no sources, because it is indifferent to me whether what I have thought has already been thought before me by another.’<sup>17</sup>

Contra Wittgenstein, could one not argue that it is precisely such references that give the reader intellectual purchase on the edifice? Identifying the influences on an author, or the provenance of particular conceptual chains (whether philosophical or non-philosophical), helps one to grasp the specificities of systematic thought: its ‘characteristic form’.

The great virtue of a work such as Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin’s *Wittgenstein’s Vienna* lies in the reconstruction of the context of historical, cultural and philosophical influences for the *Tractatus* so as to force the reader to reconsider the received understanding of that work in the philosophical community.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. pp. 46-7.

<sup>17</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* translated by C.K. Ogden (London & New York, Routledge, 1922), p. 27.

## Introduction – Derrida, Levinas and the question of influence

Their claim is that ‘one of the least self-explanatory books ever published’<sup>18</sup> has been severed from its connection to German-language thought by the association with Cambridge and English-language philosophy<sup>19</sup>. The accepted commentary on this work took Russell and Frege as the main influences so that Wittgenstein, a ‘pupil’ of the first, was (and is) understood as overcoming the obstacles left facing his predecessors purely logical achievements<sup>20</sup>.

The complex assembling of historical, scientific, cultural and philosophical materials might appear to someone, such as Skinner, as the assembling of *circumstantial evidence* that would be prey to Ockham’s razor or other positivistic or sceptical devices. However, the point is that the dominant readings do the same *but tacitly*. The frames of understanding and reference in place dominate readings, yet because of this dominance, do not question their status, appropriateness, parochialism or non-arbitrariness and assume what such concepts, projects and structures must *mean*.

The very conjuncture of that reception is placed in question by the work of reconstruction, which makes of reading a *problem*. That is, it need not simply be presented as a hermeneutic decoding to a determinate, *correct* signified – as a reflexive foregrounding of interpretative decisions already made, it lays open the prejudices of the current community of readers<sup>21</sup>. That is, ‘influence’ is not simply a mode of historical *explanation* but a prerequisite for adequate description.

The strong claim of Janik and Toulmin is that ‘the preconceptions with which his English hearers approached [Wittgenstein] debarred them almost entirely from

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<sup>18</sup> op. cit. p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> We might add that this is exemplified (or exacerbated) by key translation decisions, chiefly, the disastrous translation of *Bild* as ‘picture’ with its consequent connection to Russell’s Logical Atomism.

<sup>20</sup> As Janik and Toulmin note, this interpretation is itself self-consciously contesting Wittgenstein’s legacy with that of the logical positivism of Carnap and Ayer.

<sup>21</sup> In Chapter 3, I will connect the genealogical practice of Derrida to Husserlian *Selbstbesinnung* as a general responsibility in writing.



## Introduction – Derrida, Levinas and the question of influence

understanding the point of what he was saying'<sup>22</sup>. This 'paradigm' clash is not produced because the figures involved occupy different historical epochs<sup>23</sup>.

Moreover, the new reading produced re-integrates comments and passages otherwise understood as afterthoughts or ephemera back into a more comprehensive, productive interpretation<sup>24</sup>. By connecting documented facts and references within the text (which gain weight because of their rarity) to sources and materials of which the English-language audience was ignorant, an object is reconstructed *which poses more questions to philosophical orthodoxy*, and hence is charged with a different relation to the philosophical present.

Skinner, Janik and Toulmin would all agree that those ignorant of the context from out of which ideas are produced are destined to misunderstand them.

'... [The] philosophical problems and ideas of actual men ... confront us like geological specimens *in situ*; and, in the process of chipping them free from their original locations, we can too easily forget the historical and cultural matrix in which they took shape, and end by imposing on them a sculptural form which reflects the preoccupations, not of their author, but of ourselves.'<sup>25</sup>

But whereas Skinner's limited, historicist aim is only to determine how it really was – 'no agent can be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done' – "Influence" need not be reduced to a *causal explanation* of the appearance of certain features in certain authors. However, what is to be uncovered in responsible discourse is the work being done by any implicit or explicit

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<sup>22</sup> op. cit. p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> With respect to Wittgenstein, it is the professional specialization of English philosophy, institutionally disconnected from other aspects of contemporary culture, which determines a different context of reception. In addition, the pre-war Viennese philosophical culture was essentially concerned with a post-Kantian legacy, where 'logic and ethics were essentially bound up with each other'.

<sup>24</sup> Skinner's antipathy to the 'mythology' of coherence is really an antipathy to coherence bought through ill-judged paraphrasing, unjustified excision and ranking of materials. Or one that compulsively excludes contradiction for fear of admitting that a thinker might have changed his or her mind, had an off-day, or sometimes produced substandard work. His opposition to textbooks, readers and summary paraphrase is shared by Derrida but for dissimilar philosophical reasons. A coherence that is able to include more than the competing alternatives underlies the aim of comprehensively describing the appropriate language-game.

<sup>25</sup> *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, pp. 27-8.



## Introduction – Derrida, Levinas and the question of influence

understanding of influence, such that the ‘general similarity’ is adequately explicated and is reflexively developed with our own prejudices to the fore. The philological coherence of any such reconstruction depends on weight of citation and its ability to organise a greater range of material. The philosophical charge comes from its challenge to the present. Only in this conjuncture does philology escape scholastic academicism.

In the specific context of understanding and evaluating the relationship between Derrida and Levinas, we can make a few preliminary comments. Although Derrida has both expressed his reservations regarding the concept of ‘influence’<sup>26</sup> and severely criticised the hermeneutic endeavour to master or decode a text by pinning it down to one meaning<sup>27</sup>, this debate is still relevant. Even if we are not concerned to identify the intentions of the original author, and accept that citation can be generalised to break every context<sup>28</sup>, the determination of ‘influence’ is essential for determining what Derrida terms the ‘protocols of reading’<sup>29</sup>.

Under what conditions does this question have philosophical significance? When the assertion of influence, or its tacit assumption, determines the understanding of a particular author. That is, *when the demonstration of an isomorphism of characteristic forms alters the philosophical claims made*. Our attention is therefore focused on the notion of a ‘general similarity’ in ‘characteristic form’. This entails:

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<sup>26</sup> ‘We are speaking of convergences, and not of influences; primarily because the latter is a notion whose philosophical meaning is not clear to us ...’. Jacques Derrida ‘Violence and Metaphysics: an essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas’ [1964] in *Writing and Difference* translated by Alan Bass (London & New York, Routledge, 2001), pp. 97-192; p. 139. Hereafter abbreviated to *VM* followed by page reference.

<sup>27</sup> In light of Skinner’s debt to Austin’s notion of linguistic acts, see Derrida’s own deconstruction of *How to Do Things with Words*. Jacques Derrida ‘Signature Event Context’ [1971] translated by Alan Bass in *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 307-330.

<sup>28</sup> Marian Hobson in her book on Derrida discusses some of the claims made by Skinner regarding linguistic acts more generally. *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines* (London & New York, Routledge, 1998); pp. 205-07. Hereafter abbreviated to *OL* followed by page reference. Skinner’s objections to the ‘reminiscences’ of commentators clashes obliquely with Hobson’s demonstration of the filamentary textual connections that cannot be controlled either by linguistic intention or determining the appropriate historical domain [*OL* 193 & 201].

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida with Jean-Louis Houdebine & Guy Scarpetta ‘Positions’ in Jacques Derrida *Positions* [1972] translated and annotated by Alan Bass 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London & New York, Continuum, 2004), pp. 35-78; pp. 54-55.



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- identifying what kind of claims each makes about the other;
- or, what claims third parties imputing such connections are making.

As we will see, there may be institutional, rather than textual, factors behind this *need* to claim influence; Skinner's suspicions about testimony can be reflexively extended to the historians or interpreters making such claims. That is, what is the historical conjuncture under which *such claims to influence are made*<sup>30</sup>? This is the polemical edge located in Skinner's reference to 'reminiscences' – there may be pressures to 'foreshorten' theoretical terrain, just as it may simply be the dilettante's opportunity to demonstrate the breadth of their reading.

It might seem strange to raise this as an issue concerning two philosophical figures who have only died within the last decade. The problem has to be understood with a slightly different inflection: what is it that Levinas and Derrida contribute to philosophy? What makes them philosophy? What marks their *philosophical* specificity?

In relation to Levinas there have been a paucity of protocols reflexively advanced and justified, but here I suggest that part of the development of such protocols is the philological construction of a nexus of influences such that certain conceptual features are not simply accepted from the dominant discourse of the day. My concern will not be to decode either Derrida or Levinas, but to demonstrate what is left out by the adoption of inadequate protocols and through the abuse of influence-claims.

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<sup>30</sup> At a certain moment, the influence of Levinas was mobilised to meet the charges of relativism, nihilism or worse levelled at Derrida. Butler writes of the 'sudden and enthusiastic turn to Levinas' in the wake of the 'de Man affair' as being an attempt to demonstrate that deconstruction is on the 'side of resistance'. Judith Butler 'Ethical Ambivalence' in *The Turn to Ethics* edited by Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen & Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York & London, Routledge, 2000), pp. 15-28; p. 19.

### I

#### The kinds of claim made for the relation between Derrida and Levinas

In the current literature there is a variety of ‘claims’ that fall under the category of influence.

##### 1. Levinas exerted a deep and lasting influence on Derrida.

Any major claim is unspecified; it is not clear whether this influence is understood to be positive or negative, appreciative or reactive. Christopher Norris’s 1987 book on Derrida notes that the ethical dimension of the latter’s work is underappreciated and that research into his connections to Levinas might shed light on this. More telling is his comment that the common Judaic background, and particularly the influence of rabbinical commentary, might enable a different appreciation of any ethical dimension<sup>31</sup>. One could also mention here the work of John Llewelyn. Though he insists on the ‘close contact’ between the two authors, and presents their work as engaging in an ‘apposition’ of question and answer, it is not clear to me what (if any) concrete claims of influence are made<sup>32</sup>. In these cases, ‘influence’ is doing no *philosophical* work.

##### 2. Derrida adopts concepts from Levinas

Concentrating on the conceptual vocabulary of both authors, some commentators see in Derrida’s use of the term, Other (*Autre* or *Autrui*), the signs of Levinas’s *own concept*<sup>33</sup>. In addition, the central role of the word, *trace*, has prompted similar assertions of homology. Simon Critchley (whose claims as to the relationship under inspection have varied over the last decade) writes in the second edition of *The Ethics of Deconstruction*:

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<sup>31</sup> Derrida (London, Fontana Press, 1987), p. 230.

<sup>32</sup> Emmanuel Levinas – *The Genealogy of Ethics* (London & New York, Routledge, 1995). *Appositions of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> The first part of this thesis will concentrate on the basic orientation of these concepts in Levinas.



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‘... when Derrida speaks with least reservation on normative issues he draws consistently and extensively on Levinas’s work. This is explicit in ‘Force of Law’, where Levinas’s conception of justice is cited on two occasions, both crucial to Derrida’s argument, and is implicit but perhaps even more pervasive in ‘The Politics of Friendship’, where the whole vocabulary of asymmetry, heteronomy and ‘the curvature of social space’ is borrowed from *Totality and Infinity*’.<sup>34</sup>

Those familiar with Derrida’s earlier work might recall the grammatological operators of erasure and paleonymy, which should make one wary of imputing any straightforward reference to Derrida’s practice of citation. Moreover, even within a French context, Levinas is not the first to make philosophical use of *autre* or *autrui*. With particular reference to *trace*, Derrida notes:

*‘C’est un mot dont nous fîmes, déjà dans les années soixantes, des usages certes fort différents à tant d’égards. Mais entre simple homonymie de rencontre et synonymie essentielle, le même nom condense et signe sans doute mieux que tout autre, ce que vous rappeliez d’un point de« contact au cœur du chiasme».’<sup>35</sup>*

‘Already by the sixties, we had made, in so many respects, clearly very different uses of this word. But between encountered homonymy and essential synonymy, without doubt, the same name condenses and signals better than anything else that which you called a point of ‘contact at the heart of a chiasmus’.’ [my translation]

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida had distinguished his use of the *trace*, drawing from, but exceeding, the notions of *Spur* found in both Freud and Nietzsche, from that of Levinas mobilised in the ‘critique of Heideggerian ontology’<sup>36</sup>. Although Derrida has spoken directly of his ‘inheritance’ from Levinas, he does so while insisting on the both displacement performed and the conjuncture of *several different traditions* at these nodes<sup>37</sup>. The question of influence requires that such displacements and conjunctures are specified.

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<sup>34</sup> *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* [1992] 2nd edition (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 269. Hereafter abbreviated to *ED* followed by page reference.

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida & Alain David (interview) ‘Derrida avec Levinas’, p. 32.

<sup>36</sup> *Of Grammatology* [1967] translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak corrected edition (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 70. Hereafter abbreviated to *Gramm* followed by page reference.

<sup>37</sup> ‘It is the experience of the other as other, the fact that I permit the other to be other, which presupposes a gift without exchange, without reappropriation, without jurisdiction. Here I meet up with several different traditions, whilst also slightly displacing them .... There is an inheritance from Levinas, when he defines the relation to the other simply as justice .... There is also that paradoxical thought, Plotinian in its first formulation, but which also surfaces in



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We can begin to see the pertinence about Skinner's warning against mistaking citation, paraphrase or terminological similarities for a meaningful assertion of influence. Similarly, the problems of general philosophical tradition and milieu mean that more argument has to be made to specify what can be attributed to Levinas. It is not enough to point at 'borrowed vocabulary': that it is indeed borrowed, borrowed from Levinas, and maintains its previous functionality must all be corroborated, else these sentences are philosophically meaningless<sup>38</sup>.

### 3. The sense of ethics in Derrida is the same as that in Levinas

The first edition of *The Ethics of Deconstruction* pushed a markedly different line – a line bookended in the second edition by a new preface and three appendices, which suggest reservations and revisions<sup>39</sup>. The earlier claim is

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Heidegger, and then in Lacan: giving not only what one has, but what one has not.' 'The Deconstruction of Actuality: An Interview with Jacques Derrida' in *Radical Philosophy* 68 (1994), pp. 28-41.

<sup>38</sup> We are probably obliged to mention here Leonard Lawlor's recent book on Husserl and Derrida. It could serve as an object demonstration of Skinner's well-founded worries about paraphrase, suspect citation and mistaking reference for influence. Moreover, its wilful exclusion of most of Derrida's writing is unwarranted. Despite the titular restriction to Derrida's writings on Husserl, it, in fact, advances a more ambitious 'defence of the Derridean faith' on the basis of these works. Without a discussion of the problems of philosophical presentation, grammatology, *écriture* (misunderstood as a synonym for the sign) and the subtle engagement with the human sciences, it is a deeply flawed interpretation. Moreover it draws on Levinas without concern to adequately justify that investment: 'The turn to Levinas is obvious. Any casual examination of Derrida's later writings discovers countless references and allusions to Levinas. For example, in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida explicitly appropriates Levinas's definition of justice as the relation to the other against Heidegger's ... definition of justice as jointure.' Leonard Lawlor *Derrida and Husserl: The Basic Problem of Phenomenology* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 224. This *casual* index counting is taken to stand for concrete demonstration of 'general similarity'. Describing the late Derrida as an 'alchemical combination of Nietzsche and Levinas' only exacerbates the problem, since it is not even clear what this could mean. 'In *Specters of Marx*, the clearest evidence of Derrida's strange amalgamation of Levinas and Nietzsche occurs when he says, "There where man, a certain determinate concept of man, is completed, there the pure humanity of man, of the *other man* and of man *as other* begins or has finally the chance of heralding itself – of promising itself. In an apparently inhuman or a-human fashion.' This sole evidential support is taken from a discussion of Kojève and Fukuyama regarding post-historical humanity, and is indicative of a compulsive projection of the author's own concerns into texts that require a far more patient treatment. Butler, in 'Ethical Ambivalence' [op. cit.] makes some suggestions as to how a *rapprochement* between Nietzsche and Levinas could be attempted. For a more solid survey of Derrida's engagement with Husserl, see Paola Marrati *Genesis and Trace: Derrida Reading Husserl and Heidegger* [1998] translated by Simon Sparks (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> The revisions are due largely to the later appearance of *Politics of Friendship*, *Specters of Marx* and the two-part essay 'Force of Law'. *The Politics of Friendship* [1994] translated by George Collins (London, Verso, 1997). Hereafter abbreviated to *PoF* followed by page reference. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International* [1993] translated by Peggy Kamuf (London & New York, Routledge, 1994). 'Force of Law: The



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determined by the contemporaneous accusations of nihilism in deconstruction (in light of the de Man and Heidegger “affairs”). Critchley’s argument was that Derrida’s work should be understood as ethical, *provided we understand it in the transformed sense that ‘ethics’ achieves in Levinas’s writing*. Here, there is a claim to general similarity based on characteristic form<sup>40</sup>.

The concern for the Other is linked to Derrida’s practice of writing, re-styled as *clôtural writing* by Critchley. Such writing is marked by detailed readings of particular texts in which Derrida seeks to locate moments of singularity and alterity that break with or interrupt the received context of interpretation. Critchley espies the motivating source, the ‘demand’, for all ethical and political action in this irruption of transcendence, an awakening of ‘responsibility that leads to political action’ [ED 30]. Derrida himself has expressed persistent doubts over this interpretation, which is still tied to classical, disciplinary sub-categories of philosophy, such as ‘ethics’, ‘politics’, ‘metaphysics’ [cf. ED 15], etc., which might serve to recuperate more radical insights and suggestions back into a mainstream that would remain unchallenged<sup>41</sup>.

### 4. ‘Strange attractors’

A more nuanced approach is suggested in Marian Hobson’s *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines*. Although not addressed to him, Hobson’s attention to the particular manner of construction employed disrupts Critchley’s reduction of Derrida’s writings to the continual performance of the one function. In using the

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“Mystical Foundation of Authority” [1989/1990] translated Mary Quaintance in *Acts of Religion* edited by Gil Anidjar (New York & London, Routledge, 2002), pp. 230-298. Hereafter abbreviated to *FoL* followed by page reference.

<sup>40</sup> On ‘Violence and Metaphysics’, Spivak writes: ‘Derrida reads Levinas critically, suggesting that he too is complicit with philosophy in the Greek. But about the openness of the question, the prior claim of responsibility to the trace of the other ... he is in agreement.’ ‘Feminism and Deconstruction, Again: Negotiations’ in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London, Routledge, 1993), pp. 121-140; p. 307 fn. 27.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Beardsworth has provided one of the few disputations on this terrain, challenging Critchley’s claim that Levinas’s ethics is needed to supplement deconstruction. He still accepts Critchley’s general structuring of the intellectual and developmental relations between the two, in particular, the argument that *Otherwise than Being* responds to Derrida’s earlier criticisms. Richard Beardsworth *Derrida and the Political* (London & New York, Routledge, 1996), pp. 122-43. Rudi Visker’s challenge to Critchley centres more on the possibility of producing a Levinasian position *without recourse to metaphysics and, in particular, God*: only as trace of infinity (synonymous with God and Good on Visker’s reading) can the face be that which commands me.



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vocabularies of others, ‘Barthes or Levinas for instance ... Derrida works on them by extending his own work into the work of the other he is referring to. He thus pays a kind of duty to that work, of care and respect, at the same time as causing it to spread out in ways that seem unpredictable.’ [OL 121] This operation is a ‘strange attractor’<sup>42</sup>.

This interaction with different texts ‘leaves aside’ any classificatory distinction ‘such as a move into ethics’ [OL 5] and concerns itself with the *new*, not merely the *acknowledgement* of the singular, with both sets of co-ordinates being altered by the passage. A modality of philosophical writing is produced that does not simply demonstrate a *theme* of transcendence (ethical or otherwise): it ‘builds up a coherence, not by developing rules for it, but by establishing connections, contacts, links and extensions.’ [OL 26]

Thereby, specific textual events occur solely with reference to particular authors or groups of themes. In this way, contra Critchley, Derrida’s work on Levinas is not allowed to stand as representative for his *œuvre* as a whole. Nor is it seen as a simple *tête-à-tête*: the question of the Other is constructed across a terrain determined by Husserl and Levinas.

Where Critchley’s account valorises the *approach* of writing as ethical, Hobson sees that “otherness” draws from a metalevel thesis about language<sup>43</sup>. Language as subjective field cannot be gathered into a site of *present synthesis*; on Hobson’s reading, *this* is the ‘first site of responsibility to the other’, not the *attention* to alterity:

‘The excess beyond synthesis in language means that other meanings or the possibility of other meanings, future ones as well as past, have to be deferred to. But that responsibility may not be answered to – it is because it may *always possibly not* be answered to that there is an ethics. The new cannot be programmed for, and ethical response is not merely a result of calculation

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<sup>42</sup> Taken from ‘turbulence theory’, ‘Strange attractor is the name given to a process pattern into which a type of turbulence appears to tending (at infinity) to settle.’ [OL 252 fn. 30]

<sup>43</sup> Language in Levinas does not name the determinate system of signs of natural language. It is already an ethical concept that becomes more thoroughly thematized as Saying in *Otherwise than Being*.



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within any ‘felicitic calculus’ or theory of ‘social responsiveness’ ....’ [OL 138]

Importantly, she concludes that the ‘Other’ cannot be treated as a ‘lexeme’, since it is a ‘pointer, of a slightly different status, to what cannot be represented’ [OL 141], which means that the Other cannot be interpreted as *the Other person* attributed by Critchley to Levinas’s ethics. The concern for the new, the openness of responsiveness to *otherness*, troubles any emphasis on transcendence, or ‘otherwise than being’<sup>44</sup>. Dissenting again from any imputation of homology, she notes that, for Derrida, the other of language is *within language*, an internal difference that Levinas himself has to reject.

A reading such as Hobson’s perhaps avoids the pitfalls of an ‘influence model’, since it acknowledges that Derrida works on Levinas in quite specific ways, developing theses which are specific to Derrida, without imputing any explanatory homology. Here the characteristic form, in the sense of an isomorphism of conceptual content, is disrupted by the variety of writing produced.

### 5. Later Derrida is profoundly marked by Levinas

Critchley among others has produced a chronological inflection by articulating an ‘ethico-political turn’. The suggestion here of a change in Derrida’s concerns in the years after 1980 means that it differs from the claims found in 2 and 3 above. Such a developmental thesis might challenge a micrological focus on individual texts. Yet, the nature of this ‘turn’ is hard to pin down.

Peter Osborne has described ‘At this very moment...’ as more of an appreciation than a critique and that in the more recent work, ‘profoundly marked by

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<sup>44</sup> This is further augmented in Hobson’s reading of Derrida’s essay, ‘At This Very Moment...’ which will be the focus of Chapter Five. ‘At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am’ [1980] translated by Ruben Berezdin in *Re-Reading Levinas* edited by Robert Bernasconi & Simon Critchley (London, Athlone Press, 1991), pp. 11-48. Hereafter abbreviated to ATVM followed by page reference.



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Levinas', there has been an '[elision] of the implications of his own earlier critique'<sup>45</sup>.

From Osborne's formation, we would have to specify which implications are elided. Owing to which aspects of Levinas? Even here we would have to determine both the change in Derrida's systematics and whether any change was entirely internal, comprehensible in terms of intellectual development or whether polemical, historical and even non-philosophical factors were in play. In a paper from 1993<sup>46</sup>, Critchley espies a shift from a constative mode of writing concerned with 'formulating a 'theoretico-historico-interpretative grid' to a *performative*, 'quasi-phenomenological'<sup>47</sup> mode, which 'is concerned with the careful description and analysis of particular phenomena, in order to elucidate their deeply aporetic or undecidable structures'<sup>48</sup>. However, the reduction of this performative modality to 'textual enactments' means that the *conjunctural* formation of Derrida's writings is not raised<sup>49</sup>. For Critchley, the first formulations of deconstruction even represent a 'false start'; now, with the 'ethico-political turn', the 'grid of grammatology' is left behind.

Given that Derrida's early work on Husserl is also phenomenological (quasi or otherwise)<sup>50</sup>, this seems an underdeveloped thesis, and might be understood as

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<sup>45</sup> Peter Osborne *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant Garde* (London & New York, Verso, 1995), p. 224 n. 19.

<sup>46</sup> Simon Critchley 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism – Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal?' in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* edited by Chantal Mouffe (London & New York, Routledge, 1996); pp. 18-40.

<sup>47</sup> Rudi Visker (*Truth and Singularity* p. 258) has rightly questioned the obscurity of this term, which is also used by Lingis in his introduction to *Otherwise than Being* [OtB xv].

<sup>48</sup> Critchley 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism', pp. 31-32.

<sup>49</sup> This term is not unrelated to the Althusserian sense of *conjoncture*. The texts associated with the GREPH movement, gathered in *Du Droit à la Philosophie*, show an attention to the sphere or terrain on and in which philosophical writing is formulated – it is not an ideal, neutral field in which theoretical claims are advanced. Derrida *Du droit à la philosophie* (Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1990). Translated in English in two volumes: *Who's Afraid of Philosophy? Right to Philosophy 1* translated Jan Plug (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002); *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2* translated Jan Plug and others (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>50</sup> Notwithstanding a perhaps complicated relation within Derrida's work between 'deconstruction' and 'grammatology', Marrati insists on the consistency between the earliest work and the putative 'ethico-political turn'. She insists that it cannot be understood as an 'abandoned first object' and that Derrida's characteristic writing could only be developed through Husserl (*Genesis and Trace* p. xiv). 'Deconstruction, then, is born in Derrida's work on Husserl; more than this, however, it is born in the work that Derrida has done *with* Husserl, *thanks to* him



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occasional piece, too reactive in its development as a response to the also-present Richard Rorty<sup>51</sup>.

By the time we get to the second edition of *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (1999) and his 'Introduction' to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (2001), this thesis has been strengthened to the point at which he feels able to claim that Derrida's recent work is 'largely *derived* from that of Emmanuel Levinas' [ED 268 my emphasis]: 'The alleged ethical turn of Derrida's thinking might be viewed simply as a return to Levinas, one of the major influences on the development of his thinking, as is amply evidenced by the 1964 essay ['Violence and Metaphysics']'.<sup>52</sup> One might again see a further complication in this latter sentence which runs counter to a theory of a turn or break. However, this means that Critchley advances three distinct kinds of claim about the relation between the Derrida and Levinas, each of which requires a different kind of supporting demonstration.

### 6. Derrida, Levinas and Religion

Although Hent de Vries does not explicitly distinguish an early from a late Derrida and also admits that his analyses move in directions of which the latter might not approve, his book *Religion and Violence* offers a substantial alternative to the primarily 'ethical' readings listed above<sup>53</sup>. By focusing on the texts gathered in *Du droit à la philosophie*, de Vries repositions Derrida as a theorist of public space and the modern institution in a tradition which commences with Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties* and *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere*

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and, ultimately, *against* him, something that cannot be said of any of the other authors with whom Derrida has concerned himself. Not even Heidegger.' [ibid. p. 181] It is important to also stress the *against* for it is in the decentring of temporality from the self-presence of the Living Present of Husserl's analysis that Marrati believes ethical tension enters into deconstruction – time is open to the other [ibid. p. 182].

<sup>51</sup> See Rorty *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 122 ff.

<sup>52</sup> 'Introduction' to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* edited by Simon Critchley & Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 1-32; p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore & London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).



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*Reason*<sup>54</sup>. The broader theme of the book is the deconstruction of concepts such as culture, identity, integration and difference that play a role in thinking and managing political cohesion, whilst refashioning the state-sanctioned role of religion and its troubled ecclesiastical history of censorship and toleration<sup>55</sup>. Modernity has been framed by the boundaries and limits that secularisation has still not overcome, but this is a boon for de Vries, since it is only these resources which allow one to address and ‘remedy’ radical evil: ‘... even where the “religious” can no longer be identified as an integral and compelling system of belief ... it provides us with the critical terms, argumentative resources, and bold imaginary that is necessary for a successful analysis of contemporary culture.’<sup>56</sup> For de Vries, this is ‘a formally indicated religion defined as the relation to the other that does not close itself off in a totality’<sup>57</sup>.

Correctly championing a correspondence in Derrida’s work between the analyses of institutions, media, performativity and the various ‘violences’ (or impurities) endemic to founding, conceptualising and decision, de Vries positions Derrida as only understandable in relation to both Kant and Levinas. Whereas Kant’s *Besuchsrecht* describes a political concept of hospitality, Levinas’s welcome given to the Other describes the beginnings of a relation that breaks with ontology.

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<sup>54</sup> *Conflict of the Faculties* [1798] translated by Mary J Gregor (Lincoln, Nebraska University Press, 1992). *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* [1793] translated by George di Giovanni (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>55</sup> For slightly more detail, see my review of the book. McGettigan ‘Therefore Religion?’, *Radical Philosophy* 116 (November / December 2002), pp. 43-46.

<sup>56</sup> op. cit. p. 236.

<sup>57</sup> op. cit. p. 16. Lawlor arrives at a comparable conclusion through an idiosyncratic interpretation of *Specters of Marx*, where he espies a call for new theologians who will approach the paradox of belief in God after the death of God. This includes a ‘pantheistic’ interpretation of Derrida’s phrasing: *tout autre est tout autre*. We have already mentioned the failures of this particular book, but, in general, those readers who impose a theological, or ‘post-theological’, interpretation on both Levinas and Derrida miss the speculative, political dimension and latch on to passages as straightforward *statements* without concern for the writing strategy determining them or the structure and conjuncture in which they appear. This thesis will take care to explicate the central place of *atheism* and anti-theology in Levinas. See, *inter alia*, John D. Caputo *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington & Indianapolis; Indiana University Press, 1997).



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The political inflection of this account distinguishes it from Critchley's later insistence on the 'moral grammar of everyday life', but, in some ways, provides a more robust account of the thesis of the first edition of *The Ethics of Deconstruction*: an account of the political supplement provided by reading Derrida alongside Levinas<sup>58</sup>.

### Derrida on the 'Ethico-Political Turn'

Things are complicated by Derrida's own comments on these matters (and Skinner's reservations about such testimony)<sup>59</sup>. He has discussed explicitly both the idea of an 'ethico-political turn' *and* his own understanding of his relation to Levinas.

In a paper included in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, Derrida rejects Rorty's distinction between his own early and late work (where the late work is represented by *Glas* and *The Postcard* and is concerned with self-creation): the early work on grammatology represents the 'discursive, theoretical conditions' of the other writings – they could not have been written without them<sup>60</sup>. But as early as 1980, Derrida outlined a variation in his writing strategy<sup>61</sup>. Prior to 1970, he was concerned with the protection and preservation of the question as such – the continued pertinence and applicability of the philosophical. His work after focused on the transformation of this project into 'the call to the wholly other'. We have already noted that any rapid equation of positions based on vocabulary or homologous formulations is precipitous, but we can see here the

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<sup>58</sup> Intriguingly, de Vries insists that Levinas's own position is politically insufficient: it is not "deconstructive" and instead resembles the position that Adorno attributes to Augustine's *City of God*. Cf. Theodor Adorno 'Progress' translated by Henry W. Pickford in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 143-160.

<sup>59</sup> These reservations are absent from the opening paragraph of Herman Rapaport's book: 'Of course, it is well-known that Derrida has made an ethical turn in the 1980s that has focused on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas ...'. *The Later Derrida* (London & New York, Routledge, 2002).

<sup>60</sup> 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism' in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* edited by Chantal Mouffe (London, Routledge, 1996), pp. 77-87.

<sup>61</sup> *Les Fins de l'homme. A partir du travail de Jacques Derrida* edited by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe & Jean-Luc Nancy (Paris, Galilée, 1981), pp. 183-84. Cited by Spivak in 'Limits and Openings of Marx in Derrida' in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London, Routledge, 1993), pp. 97 – 119, pp. 98-9.



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potential justification underlying positions such as Critchley's. However, Derrida is wary of the meaning of 'turn' in any account of his work in the 1980s or 1990s:

'... there never was ... a *political turn* or *ethical turn* in "deconstruction", at least not as I experience it ... If a "turning" turns by "veering" round a curve or by forcing one, like wind in one's sails, to "veer" away or change tack, then the trope of turning turns poorly or turns bad, turns into the wrong image. For it diverts thought or turns it away from what remains to be thought; it ignores or runs counter to the thought of the very thing that remains to be thought.'<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, in '*Passions*' he argues that his recent writings do not represent a 'turn', even if they do more frequently address certain ethical or political questions: they *develop* from the earlier writings<sup>63</sup>. That is to say, the early writings are already oriented to political and ethical issues. Much stronger claims are made in 'Force of Law':

'It goes without saying that discourses on double affirmation, the gift beyond exchange and distribution, the undecidable, the incommensurable or the incalculable, on singularity, difference and heterogeneity are also, through and through, at least oblique discourses on justice. ... a deconstructive questioning that starts ... by destabilizing, complicating, or recalling the paradoxes of values like those of the proper and of property in all their registers, of the subject, and thus of the responsible subject... and of all that follows from these; Such a deconstructive questioning is through and through a questioning of law and justice, a questioning of the foundations of law, morality, and politics.' [*FoL* 235]

On the other hand:

'... some souls believe themselves to have found in Deconstruction – *as if there were one, and only one* [my italics], a modern form of immorality, of amorality, or of irresponsibility ..., while others, more serious, in less of a hurry, better disposed toward so-called Deconstruction, today claim the opposite; they discern encouraging signs and in increasing numbers (at times, I must admit, in some of my texts) which would testify to a permanent, extreme, direct, or oblique, in any event, an increasingly intense attention, to those things which one could identify under the fine names of

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<sup>62</sup> Jacques Derrida *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* [2003] translated by Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 39. Hereafter abbreviated to *Rogues* followed by page reference.

<sup>63</sup> '*Passions: "An Oblique Offering"*' [1992] translated by David Wood in *On the Name* edited by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 3-31. Hereafter abbreviated to *Passions* followed by page reference.



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“ethics”, “morality”, “responsibility”, “subject”, etc. ... [T]he remoralisation of deconstruction, which naturally seems more attractive than that to which it is rightly opposed, but which at each moment risks reassuring itself in order to reassure the other and to promote the consensus of a new dogmatic slumber. And it is so that one not be in too much of a hurry to say that it is in the name of a higher responsibility and a more intractable [*intraitable*] moral exigency that one declare one’s distaste, uneven as it may be, for both moralisms.’ [*Passions* 15]

The thorough-going problematization of justice and law need not be inconsistent with a refusal to succumb to a reanimated moralism (particularly one forged in reaction to the charges of apolitical relativism). But we should note that the main wariness in Derrida’s comments relates to a developmental or phased model which would *separate off* this later work – again, we should note that insufficient attention has been paid to the difference between a turn, a new inflection, a new strategy or a break, etc. This lacuna is mainly due to the monolithic notion of philosophical writing operating in many of the texts on Derrida – that philosophy is constitutively propositional in form and states a position which is held to be true by the author as individual, legal person, etc.

Here one has the suspicion that a pedagogical shorthand has been hypostasised without proper warrant. There is no adequate discussion in the literature with which we are concerned of what it means to divide an author’s work into periods, nor how to avoid the danger of a weak intellectual history, particularly when one considers the variation in writing practice evinced by Derrida across contemporaneous texts; one worries that an illegitimate, but commonplace, biographical model is being used to evade the philosophical work needed to advance such a claim.

### The ‘finite’ conversation

‘You know my admiration and gratitude for Levinas. I consider his thinking an immense event of this century. But the troubling ‘appropriation’ of which you speak is not merely catholic and conservative, it can also be that of a naive moralism or of a faddish and simplifying mediatisation. In order to try and resist, in my way in the texts which I devoted to him, I always insist discretely yet clearly on certain reserves, above all on political misgivings (for instance on the topic of the nation of Israel, in *Adieu*) or on the



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paradoxes of his concept of 'the third' and of 'justice', on the always possible perversions of his ethics, on an inevitable 'perjury' at the heart of 'droiture'.<sup>64</sup>

If we are to attribute any more frequent treatment of such themes to the influence of Levinas, then further comments from the interview with *Magazine Littéraire* are pertinent. Repeating Levinas's reference to a 'contact at the heart of a chiasmus', he emphasises the equivocation between the crossing and the encounter: each continues afterwards on a separate path. Here Derrida details four points of difference between Levinas and himself:

1. Derrida *worries* about the discursive strategy and inner workings of Levinas's writing, which is not simply to do with style or rhetoric, but with the justification of vocabulary, logic, syntax and semantics, which sometimes is even borrowed from a Heideggerian ontology<sup>65</sup>.
2. The question of sexual difference, where Derrida thinks that the discussion of the feminine is subject to an androcentric privileging in Levinas. In this context, Derrida cites his interrogation of the concept of fraternity in *Politics of Friendship* as a challenge to Blanchot *and* Levinas (bear in mind Critchley's assembling of this text *in support of* a later, Levinasian Derrida)<sup>66</sup>.
3. The status of the animal.
4. Finally: '*Rien n'est plus différent, entre Lévinas et moi, que la culture et l'histoire politiques. Et sans doute que les choix politiques, en France et ailleurs.*'<sup>67</sup> (Nothing is more different, between Levinas and me, than

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<sup>64</sup> Jacques Derrida 'Interview with Thomas Assheuer' in *Die Zeit* ((March 5, 1998) translated Peter Krapp – available at <http://www.hydra.umn.edu/derrida/zeit.html> .

<sup>65</sup> In comments recorded in the publication entitled *Altérités*, Derrida makes reference to many of the same 'differences', but he insists there that these are not 'philosophical differences'. It is hard to understand this phrase, since what is taken to be most distinctive about deconstruction is precisely the treatment of these differences as being of philosophical importance. Jacques Derrida and Pierre-Jean Labarrière *Altérités* (Paris, Éditions Osiris, 1986), pp. 74-5. Such passages should be compared to the opening remarks in 'Violence and Metaphysics' where the new questions put to philosophy, non-philosophical questions, are 'the only questions today capable of founding the community ... of those who are still called philosophers ...' [VM 98].

<sup>66</sup> One could also cite here the discussion of the passages on feminine welcoming in *Totality and Infinity* in *Adieu* [Adieu 36-45]. 'This feminine alterity seems marked by a series of lacks.' [Adieu 36]

<sup>67</sup> A likely reference to Levinas's writings on Israel.



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our political culture and history. And without doubt between our political choices, in France and elsewhere).

To clarify, both the second and third points relate *directly* to the category of the other ‘person’. The fourth relates to any ethical or political assessment of the two authors. Incidentally, later in the same article, Derrida writes of the risk of depoliticisation in the reception of Levinas, for which Levinas himself is not entirely innocent and insists that there is a politics in Levinas, not simply an articulation of an ethical demand or impetus towards politics. At the same time, he espies a ‘pretty conservative’, determinate political practice, especially with respect to the national (from which Derrida stresses his distance), and the beginning of a revolutionary politics of hospitality and responsibility towards the other. ‘*Cette dimension révolutionnaire de l’écriture de Lévinas résisterait, selon moi, à toute la «récupération» ...*’<sup>68</sup>

It is this danger of recuperation that has not been dispelled by the English-language reception of Levinas. This is particularly acute where a reading of Levinas is brought close to a post-Wittgensteinian project, a reading of Stanley Cavell’s notion of *acknowledgement*, or a straightforward humanism<sup>69</sup>.

### The approach taken in this thesis

One might be forgiven for feeling rather frustrated by the vague and varied claims made about this relation between Derrida and Levinas, which are often developed without reference to each other as competing alternatives, whilst simultaneously and ironically valorising a notion of philosophy as conversation. It is hard to dismiss the idea that some of these writers suffer from a conception of philosophy which precludes philological analysis, and does not allow their received notions to be sufficiently challenged. Deleuze and Guattari have poked fun at the notion of philosophy as a ‘symposium’, or dinner party *chez M. Rorthy*

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<sup>68</sup> This revolutionary dimension in Levinas’s writing could resist, in my view, all “recuperation”.

<sup>69</sup> Levinas writes *pace* Heidegger: ‘Humanism has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human.’ [*OrB* 128]



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[sic]<sup>70</sup>, where rival opinions can be advanced and challenged, where a plurality of interpretations is valued and a happy-clappy reference to conversation, gift and friendship serve to mollify the achievements of difficult writers and where *chiasme* (chiasmus) is interpreted as encounter rather than isolated crossing of two trajectories<sup>71</sup>. These conjoined features of isolation and symposium reflect a weak model of intellectual production that has not been superseded in any putative break from Anglo-American analytic philosophy<sup>72</sup>. A constructive, dialectical model involves explicit argument (even negation!), not simply the quasi-autistic proffering of a plurality of ‘readings’. We need readings but not the way the idler in the garden of knowledge needs them.

In light of Derrida’s comments cited above, this thesis will begin by treating the category of the other in Levinas’s writings as a *conundrum*. Since the notion of the other fluctuates in these various readings surveyed, I want to ask: who or what counts as the other for Levinas? Especially since the key notion of the ‘face’ [*le visage*], which cannot be equated to any actual countenance, breaks with phenomenality – no small issue for an avowed phenomenology.

My main contention is that Derrida’s recent work is generally misread because of a prejudice common to both “analytic” and “continental” philosophy: the primacy of the constative mode of presentation, that is, philosophical writing *states* what is held to be true in propositional form. Much commentary on Derrida extracts thematic content from its various presentational forms, *without* concern for philosophical valency of that form. As Hobson insists, in Derrida’s writing the *organisation* of ideas ‘affects their import’ [OL 1] and this structure

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<sup>70</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari *Qu’est-ce que la Philosophie?* (Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1991), p. 138.

<sup>71</sup> ‘According to the  $\chi$  (The chiasmus) (which can be considered a quick thematic diagram of dissemination)...’. Jacques Derrida ‘Outwork, Prefacing’ in *Dissemination* [1972] translated by Barbara Johnson (London, Continuum Press, 2004), p. 33.

<sup>72</sup> See Ernest Gellner’s astute observations on the inconsequential results of moving from argumentation to observation or description in philosophy. *Words and Things* [1959] (Harmondsworth, Pelican books, 1968). Especially Chapter IX “Sociology”. Perhaps ‘continental philosophy’ is no longer a ‘cult of paradox and obscurity’ (if it ever was), but its adherents seem to have no clear idea of the task of philosophy. Those advocating the obsolescence of the analytic – continental ‘divide’, so-called ‘post-analytic’ philosophers, are even closer to those linguistic philosophers cornered by Gellner.



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is not simply an effect of style [*OL* 1-3]. Indeed, in light of this, I would not want to insist on an easy separation of form and content: part of the ‘constative prejudice’ in contemporary philosophy relates to precisely the manner in which such a separation is achieved.

In the more recent writings which reference Levinas, my claim is that the ontological and metaphysical concerns presented in the early texts are instantiated in the formal structuring of these later essays. Any evaluation of the ethical or political value of deconstruction, and hence the relation of Derrida to Levinas, must address itself not only to the presented content of its statements but to the conditions of its philosophical presentation<sup>73</sup>.

Without foregrounding the question of formal presentation, one perhaps allows a dominant ethical discourse to determine the co-ordinates or criteria on which any evaluation of deconstruction is based. That is to say, in connecting Derrida to Levinas, one has already made a decision about the value of content over form: ethics is either that determined by Levinas, or as determined by a received philosophical tradition. Precisely what is ‘new’ in Derrida’s writing might be suppressed from the off.

With respect to Levinas, perhaps paradoxically (*prima facie*), given his distinction between the Saying and the Said, his work is much more amenable to thematization, but the *ambition and strangeness* of project has been missed in the English literature<sup>74</sup>. In particular, we will see how even the translation decision to differentiate *autre* and *autrui*, by use of *other* and *Other* respectively, misses the systematic use of capitalisation of both terms by Levinas to indicate ideas.

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<sup>73</sup> Deconstruction, in Derrida’s first writings, expressly concerns itself with such presentation and its connection to the problem of theoretical foundation.

<sup>74</sup> This is exemplified by Hilary Putnam’s contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*. To present, in conclusion, Levinas as Isaiah Berlin’s hedgehog, who knows one big thing well, is to miss completely the range of his work and writings as it attempts to displace Hegel and Hobbes. Visker’s presentation of this project as *anti-modern* captures its theoretical positioning and contests those like Zygmunt Bauman who see Levinas as a postmodern thinker of ethics (*Truth and Singularity* p. 124 fn. 21). Putnam ‘Levinas and Judaism’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* edited by Simon Critchley & Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 33-62. Zygmunt Bauman *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1993).



Moreover, *Autrui* has a reference to the idea of Infinity in *Totality and Infinity* that cannot be found in the Anglo-American “tradition” of the other person or other minds.

## II

### Problems facing research on Derrida and Levinas

#### Problem 1: Volatility in Levinas’s *œuvre*

Although we have noted that Levinas is more amenable to thematization than Derrida, the volatility of his thought over the years means that it is a difficult task to nail down what is meant by a *Levinasian position* such that it could then be attributed to the latter. With only oblique retractions, long hiatuses and belated resumptions of thematics, there is a need for a labour of philological reconstruction prior to any such presentation<sup>75</sup>.

Perhaps ‘volatility’ is not the right word for a writing career that began in 1930 and continued past the publication of *Otherwise than Being* in 1974<sup>76</sup>. A member of the generation that received its philosophical training in France *before* the impact of Husserl and Heidegger, his early work is energised by the encounter of these thinkers with his earlier influences: Bergson and Durkheim<sup>77</sup>. By *Otherwise than Being*, his footnotes refer to Foucault, Derrida, Ricoeur, Merleau-Ponty and others.

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<sup>75</sup> I here follow the third of Howard Caygill’s ‘protocols’ for constructing a reading of Levinas – one must follow the chronological development of his thought ‘to avoid the luxury of anachronistic pursuit of thematic parallels that is enjoyed by many commentators’ [*L&P* 3].

<sup>76</sup> Visker has described these texts as a ‘moving minefield’ constituting a new start compared to the earlier work (*Truth and Singularity* p. 235, 264) even though he rules out the possibility that there might be a major shift, or ‘caesura’, between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* (ibid. p. 129 fn. 29).

<sup>77</sup> See the first chapter of Caygill’s *Levinas and the Political*.



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Jacques Rolland attributes the birth of a distinctive project to the publication of *De l'évasion* in 1936<sup>78</sup>. Amongst the 'real discontinuities', he emphasises the re-appearance of that work's analysis of pleasure 40 years later in *Otherwise than Being*<sup>79</sup>. What passes uncommented is the systematic changes which preclude this analysis from forming part of *Totality and Infinity*. The analysis of shame and nausea, modelled on *Geworfenheit* and pre-empting *La Nausée* by a couple of years<sup>80</sup>, is replaced by the shame generated by the encounter with the Other as master who reveals the arbitrary basis of my self-assertion. Indeed the experience of a fatality that one cannot desert, of being 'riveted to an experience one has not chosen', is supplanted in its philosophical functioning by the egoism of separation. Levinas pointedly remarks:

'I live from the whole content of life – even from the labor which ensures the future; I live from my labor as I live from air, light, and bread. The limit or borderline case [*le cas limite*] in which need prevails over enjoyment, the proletarian condition condemning to accursed labor in which the indigence of corporeal existence finds neither refuge nor leisure at home, is the absurd world of *Geworfenheit*.' [TI 146-7] [translation altered]

But with the shift from the figure of the host to that of the hostage with the later work, comes a rejection of separation and the *chez soi* in favour of proximity and the trauma of a fundamental *Urimpression*. In his description of Saying as 'Exposure to Another', the alternative position, presented by way of contrast, is his own earlier position from *Totality and Infinity*:

'Saying taken strictly is a "signifyingness dealt the other," prior to all objectification; it does not consist in giving signs. The "giving out of signs" would amount to a prior representation of these signs, as though speaking consisted in translating thoughts into words and consequently in having been first *for-oneself* and *at home with oneself* [*chez soi*], like a substantial consistency. The relationship with the other would then extend forth as an

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<sup>78</sup> 'Getting out of Being by a New Path' in *On Escape* translated by Bettina Bergo (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 3-48. Richard A. Cohen attributes this genesis of a new project to Levinas's reading of Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* in 1935, whilst Caygill identifies a fundamental reworking of the previously employed Heideggerian categories after 1945 [L&P 49]. Cohen 'Forward to Second Edition' in *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* translated by André Orianne (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1995), pp. ix-li; p. xxiv. Franz Rosenzweig *The Star of Redemption* translated by William W Hallo (Notre Dame, Notre Dame Press, 1985 edition).

<sup>79</sup> Jacques Rolland 'Annotations' in op. cit. pp. 74-95; pp. 79-83.

<sup>80</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre *Nausea* [1938] translated by Robert Baldick (London, Penguin Books, 1965)



intentionality, out of a subject posited in itself and for itself, disposed to play, sheltered from all ills and measuring by thought the being disclosed as the field of this play.’ [OtB 48]<sup>81</sup>

The diachrony produced by the proximity of the other reconfigures the thinking of temporality. In *Existence and Existents*, temporality was understood through the fecundity of the creation in which the present was formed as a break with being<sup>82</sup>. Hypostasis is the key term designating an existence that arises over and above impersonal Being to gain autonomy. Indeed, here Levinas insists that the subject does not exist before the event of this position-taking out of which the present is formed: a present which breaks with the Bergsonian notion of duration.

The analysis of fecundity is altered in *Totality and Infinity*; it persists in a minor mode in the analysis of separation and egoism (the production of inner temporality) [TI 58] but its functional place is expanded to connect to *paternity* and the child (the creation of *infinite* time as a correction of Heidegger’s *being-towards-death*). Such a transformation parallels the changing status of *eros* and the feminine. In *Existence and Existents*, the relationship with nudity is the ‘true experience of the otherness of the other’ [E&E 40]. Moreover, it is the *heterogeneity of genders* from which ‘society and time are to be understood’: alterity only comes from *dialogue* with the other<sup>83</sup>.

*Totality and Infinity*’s distinction between the discreet Other of intimacy who is the pre-condition for the dwelling and separation (the other addressed as ‘*tu*’) and the Other as Master, addressed as ‘*vous*’, is crucial for the formulation of metaphysical Desire and the transition from egoist being to ethical relation. All this is supplanted in *Otherwise than Being* by the ‘seed of folly’, the contact more ancient than any recuperable past which prompts *disinterestedness*. The

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<sup>81</sup> See also OtB 56 & OtB 115-16.

<sup>82</sup> The present is formed *in taking charge of present*. Hence, the existential significance accorded to fatigue and indolence: the difficulty of creation and the ‘despair of the finite being who is not up to his ambitions’. *Existence and Existents* [1947] translated by Alphonso Lingis corrected edition (Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), pp. 31-35 & 81 ff. Hereafter abbreviated to E&E followed by page reference.

<sup>83</sup> One could perhaps argue that ‘dialogue’ is transformed via ‘language’ in *Totality and Infinity* to ‘saying as exposure’ in *Otherwise than Being* – but this would mask the alteration of the systematics which sees *two sexed* others in *Totality and Infinity* and only *one* unsexed other in *Otherwise than Being*.



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latter is no longer the familiar category from the philosophical tradition: a complicated pun in French *dés-intér-essé* signals the potential disinterment from being (*esse* in Latin) at the heart of the subject (as distinct from consciousness)<sup>84</sup>.

There are other features we could also examine, for example: the changing status of phenomenology in Levinas's methodology; the fortunes of the metaphor of the 'neighbour'; the relation to Sartre and Husserl; the late appearance of themes and vocabulary from Ricoeur's *Conflicts of Interpretation*<sup>85</sup> (most notably 'kerygma'); the changing relation to Kierkegaard<sup>86</sup>, etc.. In order to manage this plethora of displacements I will focus on just two topographies: those of *Totality and Infinity*, which is described by Levinas as his 'first book', and *Otherwise than Being*. Not only are these the most significant works, but they bear directly on the relation to Derrida, since Derrida extensively reviewed the former, and commentators, such as Critchley, have understood the latter as a response to that review. I perhaps should have made something clearer: from *Totality* to *Otherwise* we also find a shift in "ethical" economy from *apology* ('I offer my world to the other' [TI 91-2]) to the *nazirate* that renounces *conatus* (I fast so that the world might have bread [OtB 56])<sup>87</sup>. These themes too briefly presented above will be dealt with in detail in Part One and Chapter 4.

But here I should flag up the importance I give to a reconstruction, *à la* Janik and Toulmin, of Levinas's influences. While the general aim of this thesis is to delimit the claims that Derrida is influenced by Levinas, part of this argument is made by foregrounding what the latter receives from Franz Rosenzweig (and Marburg Neo-Kantianism more generally) in the metaphysical underpinnings of

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<sup>84</sup> Here we can still discern the diminishing of Bergson's conception of action (as opposed to habit).

<sup>85</sup> *The Conflict of Interpretations* [1969] edited by Don Ihde [1974] (London, Continuum, 2004)

<sup>86</sup> Compare TI 305 to 'Enigma and Phenomenon' [1965] translated by Alphonso Lingis (revised by Simon Critchley & Robert Bernasconi) in *Basic Philosophical Writings* edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley & Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1996) pp. 65-77; p. 71. Hereafter abbreviated to *Enigma* followed by page reference.

<sup>87</sup> 'There must be a nazirate so that the third world, so-called underdeveloped mankind, can eat its fill, so that the West, despite its abundance, does not revert to the level of an underdeveloped mankind .... To feed the world is a spiritual activity.' Emmanuel Levinas 'The Youth of Israel' translated by Annette Aronowicz in *Nine Talmudic Readings* [1970] (Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1990), pp. 120-35; p. 133.



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the ‘encounter with the face as the Idea of the Infinite’ and the ethico-political consequences of that metaphysical *orientation*. While Caygill has catalogued the importance of such events of the Dreyfus affair [*L&P* 7-10] and National Socialism, and detailed the ‘main currents of French philosophy’ [*L&P* 9] in which Levinas received his education, my supplementary emphasis concerns ‘what is too often present in [Levinas’s] work to be cited’ [*TI* 28]. Moreover, this legacy in its general scope regarding the relation of Being and Idea remains constant between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. It is only by gauging this fundamental dimension of Levinas’s writing that his full ambition can be discerned along with its speculative differentiation from Derrida’s concerns.

### Problem 2: Is Levinas’s writing philosophy?

The problem with any self-styled phenomenological method is that its descriptive analysis and presentation cannot rely on any deductive force – it appeals to the reader re-enacting the same processes concurrently<sup>88</sup>. If one finds this unconvincing, then its transcendental claims are in jeopardy. This is particularly acute for Levinas, since his metaphysical co-ordinates rebuff any transcendental moment – there is no place for Husserlian *Einfühlung* [*TI* 72, 210; *OtB* 119-20] – in favour of *transcendence*.

How then to understand intellectual compulsion in Levinas’s presentation? Derrida has famously referred to a development ‘... that is neither purely descriptive nor purely deductive. It proceeds with the infinite insistence of waves on a beach ...’. These challenges mean that Derrida describes it as ‘a work of art and not a treatise’. This kind of comment is leapt on by a fawning commentary that expresses distaste for analytical rough and tumble. But it fails to see the veiled criticism here regarding the pivotal function of Levinas’s

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<sup>88</sup> See Fichte and Husserl. Johann Gottlieb Fichte ‘A Crystal Clear Report to the General Public concerning the Actual Essence of the Newest Philosophy’ translated by John Botterman and William Rasch in *Philosophy of German Idealism* edited by Ernst Behler (New York, Continuum, 1987); pp. 39-115. See pages 44 ff. Husserl’s topics of teaching included several seminars in ‘Phenomenological Exercises’: see the list of teaching topics in the Appendix to Rudolf Bernet, Iso Kern & Eduard Marbach *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology* [1989] (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp. 235-245.



metaphors ('not always ... beyond rhetorical abuse' [VM 398 n. 7]). Such a note connects to the later comments, where the failure to think through the use of metaphor marks *Totality and Infinity* out as 'empiricism' whose only fault is to be confused with philosophy [VM 189].

There are extra dimensions here:

1. If *Otherwise than Being* tries to escape the overly ontological language of *Totality and Infinity* by moving towards a performative mode of 'textual enactment', this problem of philosophical status is heightened. Critchley has written of the 'tortuously beautiful, rhapsodic incantations' of *Otherwise than Being*<sup>89</sup>. But are we not within our rights to demand an account of how this is differentiated from a sermon, encomium or hagiography?<sup>90</sup> Should we recall Derrida's suspicion about the *incantatory* reference to the Other in our opening citation?
2. It is not clear how such forms of writing evade Ricoeur's masters of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche, Freud. Levinas's attempts to deal explicitly with the problem of ideology – either mistaking it for a problem solely pertaining to science<sup>91</sup> or incorporating it into the enigma or ambiguity of transcendence in *Otherwise than Being* – are far from convincing [OtB 152].
3. The English-language reception of Levinas ought to be more troubled by the manner in which Levinas's writing is tied to French idiom. Not only

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<sup>89</sup> 'Introduction' to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, p. 19.

<sup>90</sup> The excessive expressions are described as 'paroxysms' by Paul Ricoeur, who insists that this is not attributable to *style*. *Oneself as Another* [1990] translated by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 337-38.

<sup>91</sup> 'The suspicions engendered by psychoanalysis, sociology and politics weigh on human identity such that we never know to whom we are speaking and what we are dealing with when we build our ideas on the basis of human facts. But we do not need this knowledge in the relationship in which the other is a neighbor and in which before being an individuation of the genus *man*, a *rational animal*, a *free will*, or any essence whatever, he is the persecuted one for whom I am responsible to the point of being hostage for him.' [OtB 59]



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are etymologies used extensively with suasive intent<sup>92</sup>, but they are valorised in ‘Meaning and Sense’<sup>93</sup>. Metaphors and allusions are notoriously resistant to translation (even glossed, rhetorical force is diminished), but Levinas also makes arguments from grammatical categories, which resemble the speculative grammar of Rosenzweig<sup>94</sup>. That the French term for self, *soi*, is undeclinable [*OtB* 107] or that the pronomial form of reflexive verbs illuminates a truth of existence<sup>95</sup> carries no weight in English, especially when the latter are normally rendered by the passive in Lingis’s translations of *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*.

Ironically these features of writing style bring Levinas close to the eulogy for ‘re-description’ found in Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. The idea of poeticizing philosophy by using it as the material for ironic self-creation, rather than public, propositional argumentation, might catch certain aspects of Levinas’s paleonymy. A ‘strong poet’, who doesn’t argue or justify, Levinas could be understood to follow Rorty’s self-presentation: ‘So my strategy will be to try to make the vocabulary in which these objections are phrased look bad, thereby changing the subject, rather than granting the objector his choice of weapons and terrain by meeting his criticisms head on.’<sup>96</sup> Indeed, as we will see,

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<sup>92</sup> ‘*Le recueillement se réfère à un accueil.*’ *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l’extériorité* [1961] (Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic, 1971), p. 165. Hereafter abbreviated to *Tel* followed by page reference. An English reader finds no force in the line, “Recollection refers to a welcome”, and it is not clear what other argument is advanced to support this analysis of the dwelling and the feminine from *Totality and Infinity*.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Here lies the essential justification and great force of Heidegger’s etymologies, which, starting with the impoverished and flat meaning of a term apparently designating a content of external or psychological experience, lead toward a global situation in which a totality of experiences is assembled and illuminated. ... Experience is a reading, the understanding of meaning an exegesis, a hermeneutics and not an intuition.’ ‘Meaning and Sense’ [1964] in *Basic Philosophical Writings* edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley & Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 33-64; pp. 37-8. Hereafter abbreviated to *MS* followed by page reference.

<sup>94</sup> See Ricoeur’s comments about the need to redeem the idioms of a single language in order to become philosophical (*Oneself as Another*, p. 4).

<sup>95</sup> ‘The self involved in maintaining oneself, losing oneself or finding oneself again is not a result, but the very matrix [*matrice*] of the relations or events that these pronomial verbs express.’ [*OtB* 104]

<sup>96</sup> *op. cit.* p. 44.



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a certain resonance with pragmatism (in its Neo-Kantian forms) animates the ultimate justification of presenting this new, yet old, vocabulary<sup>97</sup>.

My tack will be different. I will suspend the question of the status of Levinas's writing the better to present the topographies of his philosophy as *Weltanschauung* or standpoint, without concern for any protocols which might attempt to warrant its assertability. The co-ordinates of his position can be isolated from the rhetorical or analytic dimension, whilst flagging up the consistent use of terms.

### Problem 3: The Multivalency of Derrida's Output

Having pared down our focus on Levinas to the two major works, we are faced with a greater problem in our treatment of Derrida. At the time of his death, over fifty books and booklets were attributed to him, with more to come posthumously. The range and writing strategy evinced by these works is unprecedented in recent philosophy. The proffered developmental models attempt to manage these texts chronologically by separating his output into phases with different theoretical concerns, but these schemas fail to attend to the multi-track structure – the plurality of deconstructions – and the subtle difference between deconstruction and grammatology. While our focus will begin with 'Violence and Metaphysics', the three texts that appeared in 1967 (*Speech and Phenomena*<sup>98</sup>, *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*<sup>99</sup>) provide the detailed analyses for appreciating some of its looser formulations. Grouped under the name "Derrida", these texts are generally misunderstood as signifying a single project entitled, "deconstruction". Here, I insist on three distinct but interrelated strands. I do not intend to group different Derridean pieces exclusively under one or other category; rather, these strands operate simultaneously across

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<sup>97</sup> Certainly, Levinas's re-presentation of philosophy as the moderation of competing demands in the political sphere also chimes with Rorty's deflationary opposition to foundation-mongering.

<sup>98</sup> *Speech and Phenomena and other essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* [1967] translated by D. B. Allison (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973). Hereafter abbreviated to *SP* followed by page reference.

<sup>99</sup> *Writing and Difference* [1967] translated by Alan Bass [1978] (London & New York, Routledge, 2001)



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individual tracts and do not reduce to any simple stand-off between structuralism and phenomenology.

The first strand engages with Husserlian phenomenology, in particular the transition to genetic transcendental phenomenology of the *Krisis*-period texts and the rethinking of the ideality of objectivity as dependent on the iteration of writing<sup>100</sup>. Derrida traces the motivation for this late development to the potential undermining of intuition's evidential certainty (and hence the Absolute ego) by the analyses of the role of temporality and the alter ego in the constitution of experience. In *Logical Investigations*, these difficulties are evaded by appeal to the auto-affection of the voice heard by my ear as the guarantor of presence and certainty<sup>101</sup>.

Deconstruction examines the history of *philosophy*, through close reading of its texts, for unwarranted privileging of speech over writing. That this does not simply amount to an overturning of philosophy can be seen in the second strand (chiefly, in the essays of *Writing and Difference*). Opposing a discourse of the human sciences seeking to circumscribe philosophy as one of its objects, Derrida demonstrates the persistence of unrecognised metaphysics, dependent on philosophical inheritance, within those disciplines.

Grammatology, to conclude this tri-partition, amounts to a displacement of Saussurian linguistics. The results of Derrida's Husserlian meditations are taken up into the structure of the sign by suggesting that the signified is structured not unlike the signifier: the intentional object is determined not simply by what is present. The neologism, *différance*, with its play on difference and deferral, thereby names the consequences for understanding meaning in this new structure. Grammatology is announced as a science of writing, an aberrant semiotics, which, following Peirce's Rhetoric, studies the laws by which signs

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<sup>100</sup> Edmund Husserl *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* [1935/36] translated by David Carr (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970). Hereafter abbreviated to *Crisis* followed by page reference.

<sup>101</sup> Edmund Husserl *Logical Investigations* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition [1901, 1913] translated by J.N. Findlay (London & Henley, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).



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produce other signs, and hence, the ‘the originary appurtenance of desire to discourse, of discourse to history of the world, and the already-there-ness of the language in which desire deludes itself’ [*Gramm* 139]. A taxonomic displacement of ontology (i.e. a non-idealist inquiry into the constituted and constituting subject) examines the productivity of signs and sign-systems (texts), discursive and non-discursive, as aggregated in the ‘general text’.

Far from being simply surpassed or left behind, the grammatological operators of citation, erasure, paleonymy and *banalisation* may, as noted by Spivak, have ‘gone underground’ in the genealogies and ventriloquism of the late writing<sup>102</sup>. A more acute reading need not see the shift of attention to the received concepts of ethics, law and justice as displacing the meta-level theses of deconstruction regarding the metaphysical status of language, speech and presence. It rather pays heed to the attenuated political consequences of that metaphysics as it ‘[haunts] school manuals, selected extracts, or popular opinion’ [*Gramm* 117] in surreptitiously forging the (institutional) space of discourse with its forces, both philosophical and non-philosophical.

In some ways, the entire question of the relation between Levinas and Derrida is mistaken since it has not sufficiently assimilated the radicality of Derrida’s challenge to academic philosophical writing. This is a problem for this thesis because it requires treatment on an altogether larger scale; all that can be done here is mark out the evidence for the necessity of rethinking the dominance (and efficacy) of constative, propositional writing through the demand produced from this particular case study. That is, Derrida’s ‘engagement’ with Levinas illuminates a previously ignored hiatus in the secondary literature – it does not occur in a neutral, purely theoretical space. It is this dimension of Derrida’s writing that raises a different set of problems relating to the *urgency* of decision and responsibility as it reflexively relates to the very conditions of its writing. And such a responsibility can only be articulated, if at all, in relation to a broader question: what is the task of philosophy?

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<sup>102</sup> Spivak ‘Limits and Openings of Marx in Derrida’.

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‘If there were a community, or even a communism of writing, it would above all be on condition that war be waged on those, the greatest number, the strongest and the weakest at the same time, who forge and appropriate for themselves the dominant usages of language...’ [*PoF* 71].

There is a Popperian dimension to this thesis in that it aims to test and falsify the hypothesis that the late Derrida is Levinasian or prompted by a simple, positive engagement with Levinas (generally as a *homage* or an *extension* of his work). These claims regarding *influence* constitute philosophical claims: that the characteristic content of Derrida’s writing can be found in Levinas.

To this end, this thesis reassembles the material organised by Critchley and shows how it can and should be read *otherwise*. In the course of this repetition, a more general thesis comes to the fore; it relates to the distortion of both figures through received protocols of reading and assumptions about the structure of philosophy. Chiefly it concerns:

1. the relation to the history of philosophy and history more generally;
2. the sub-categories of philosophy (metaphysics, political philosophy, ethics, etc.) and their inter-relation;
3. the relation between theory and practice or pure and practical reason.

These are all displaced by *both* Levinas *and* Derrida. There is a constitutive inability to comprehend the ambition of both thinkers resulting from the persistent collapse of their claims into familiarity. It is this that this thesis resists by insisting on the speculative ambition of both writers.



## **Structure of Chapters**

### **PART ONE *Totality and Infinity***

#### **Chapter 1**

##### ***Totality and Infinity* 1 – Separation and Transcendence**

#### **Chapter 2**

##### ***Totality and Infinity* 2 – the Idea of the West and the otherness of the Other**

These two chapters provide a close reading of *Totality and Infinity* and its contemporary, ‘Meaning and Sense’, to interrogate Levinas’s concept of the “Other” [*Autrui*] as the encounter with the idea of the infinite in the face. I examine the material, socio-cultural and linguistic conditions of possibility for this encounter. Levinas mobilises the resources of his neo-Kantian precursor, Franz Rosenzweig, to oppose the perceived nihilistic consequences of structuralist anthropology’s contestation of ethnocentrism.

Levinas’s speculative *political* project is radically distinct from its presentation in the English-language literature. Its politico-philosophical task is the production, generalisation and institutionalisation of this idea of transcendence in the world: only this task gives meaning to human existence. However, the material and cultural constraints of the encounter with the Other restrict the guiding idea to the prosperous inheritors of the Judaeo-Christian legacy. In sum, the Other opposes a valorisation of alterity *qua* otherness.

### **PART TWO**

#### ***Au Cœur du Chiasme* – the exchange between Levinas and Derrida**

#### **Chapter 3**

##### **Derrida’s critique of Levinas in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’**

‘Violence and Metaphysics’ is an extended review of Levinas’s major work, *Totality and Infinity*. I argue that Derrida is offering a critique of Levinas, to which there is a three-fold dimension:



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1. Derrida contests Levinas's reading of the history of philosophy as the history of the Same: the tradition anticipates much of Levinas's concern for the other.
2. Levinas borrows the resources from philosophical tradition from which he claims to be breaking.
3. Since the presentation does not *justify* its discursive resources, it collapses into what Derrida calls "empiricism".

Additionally, I emphasise the space Derrida devotes to a programmatic statement of his own speculative project *in contrast* to Levinas's. These statements are developed with respect to Derrida's main writings from the 1960s.

### Chapter 4

#### *Otherwise than Being*

Levinas is taken to respond to Derrida's criticisms by developing the distinction between the Saying [*le Dire*] and the Said [*le Dit*] in *Otherwise than Being*. The chapter begins by demonstrating how this thematization fails to meet the philosophical charges outlined by Derrida. It then proceeds to analyse its specific topography in detail. The main difference is a shift in the very idea of the Other to the proximal *other in me* interpreted as a diachrony resulting from a contact more ancient than memory can recuperate.

### Chapter 5

#### The Metaphysical Standoff

This chapter examines two further episodes in the "conversation" between Levinas and Derrida. 'Wholly Otherwise'<sup>103</sup> is Levinas's contribution to a collection devoted to Derrida. It has been the subject of a rose-tinted interpretation in English-language literature. I demonstrate here that this interpretation is unsubstantiated and is based upon an eagerness to project an "affinity" between the two. Instead, 'Wholly Otherwise' is a polemical re-statement of position against Derrida, whom he sees as trapped within ontology.

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<sup>103</sup> 'Wholly Otherwise' [1973] in *Re-Reading Levinas* edited by Robert Bernasconi & Simon Critchley (London, Athlone Press, 1991), pp. 3-10. Hereafter abbreviated to *WhO* followed by page reference.



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revolving in the ‘circle of Being and nothingness’ [*Who* 7].

‘At this Very Moment in this Work Here I Am’ was written by Derrida in 1980, again for a Festschrift, this time in honour of Levinas. My reading suggests that its complexity in large part stems from a performative (parodic) demonstration of how Levinas would have to write were he to remain faithful to his newly introduced theory of language and its relation to what is beyond being.

## **PART THREE Reading Derrida Otherwise**

### **Chapter 6**

#### **Conjunctural Writings: Derrida’s later writing on Levinas**

This chapter consists of a critical survey of the major texts referring to Levinas produced by Derrida since the mid-1980s. In contrast to readers who mine these texts for propositional content, I attend in particular to the practice of citation and argumentative structure to illustrate how these apparently “stylistic” features instantiate the thematics examined earlier and hence resist simplistic readings. I show that Derrida differs from Levinas crucially with respect to both the concept of the other and futural orientation.

After the conclusion, I have included two Appendices, the first of which offers an interpretation of Husserl’s writings from the mid-1930s to show how similar Neo-Kantian themes are present in his understanding of science. Appendix B offers a brief outline of a way to return to this material from a ‘grammatological’ perspective.



## Part One

### *Totality and Infinity*

The aim of these first two chapters is to connect a persistent theme in Levinas of a fundamental, insurmountable, structural difference between Judaeo-Christian Europe and Asian civilisation to the thematics of the Other. The question guiding my reading of Levinas is simply: are all humans Others? Or rather, can all humans encounter the face of the Other as an idea of the infinite? And if not, what distinguishes those who are able to do so from the rest of humanity?

These chapters will focus on Levinas's major work, *Totality and Infinity*, and its near-contemporary, 'Meaning and Sense', from 1964. In my view, the latter has central importance because it is a polemical engagement with Merleau-Ponty's advocacy of structural anthropology (chiefly, Claude Lévi-Strauss) insofar as the latter resists any hierarchialisation of cultures. This 'ontology of decolonisation' is rejected by Levinas, because, in the final analysis it leads to nihilism.

The first chapter concentrates on a description of the basic mechanics of the ego and the encounter with the Other: the characteristic form of Levinas's philosophy. Chapter Two illustrates how these very mechanics instantiate the obstacles to universality mentioned above.



## Chapter One

### *Totality and Infinity* 1 – Separation and Transcendence

*‘L’Autre en tant qu’autre est Autrui. ... Cette expérience absolue dans le face à face où l’interlocuteur se présente comme l’être absolu (c’est à dire comme l’être soustrait aux catégories), ne serait pas concevable pour Platon sans l’entremise des Idées. Mais l’idée platonicienne que fixe le penseur, équivaut-elle à un objet sublime et perfectionné? La parenté entre l’Ame et les Idées ... n’est-elle qu’une métaphore idéaliste exprimant la perméabilité de l’être à la pensée? L’idéauté de l’idéal se réduit-elle à un accroissement superlatif des qualités ou nous amène-t-elle à une région où les êtres ont un visage, c’est à dire sont présents dans leur propre message? Hermann Cohen – en cela platonicien – soutenait qu’on ne peut aimer que des idées – mais la notion de l’Idée équivaut en fin de compte à la transmutation de l’autre en Autrui.’*

*Totalité et Infini* pp. 67-68

*‘The other qua other is the Other. ... The absolute experience in the face to face, in which the interlocutor presents himself as absolute being (that is, as being withdrawn from the categories), would for Plato be inconceivable without the interposition of the Ideas. ... But is the Platonic Idea attended to by the thinker equivalent to a sublimated and perfected object? Is the kinship between the Soul and the Ideas ... but an idealist metaphor expressing the permeability of being to thought? Is the ideality of the ideal reducible to a superlative extension of qualities, or does it lead us to a region where beings have a face, that is, are present in their own message? Herman [sic] Cohen (in this a Platonist) maintained that one can love only ideas; but the notion of an Idea is in the last analysis tantamount to the transmutation of the other into the Other.’*

*Totality and Infinity* p. 71

The temptation was to hold this citation back, to set up a puzzle, a conundrum, and then provide the key. Admittedly, this is a puzzle that has been circulating around the secondary literature on Emmanuel Levinas in various forms for a number of years: what is the status of *l’Autrui*?

Levinas’s characteristic idea of first philosophy lying in the ethical relation generated by the face-to-face encounter with the Other has generally been understood in a familiar humanist, anti-bureaucratic sense: it is in this fundamental personal contact that I am struck by my commonality with the other. This dimension is taken to be forgotten or occluded in the monster states of the



## Chapter 1 *Totality and Infinity* 1 – Separation and Transcendence

twentieth century and by philosophies which privilege such state-forms. with their mediating institutions, as fundamental to equality.

However, those who have sought resources in Levinas for a project of anti-racism have been confounded by some of his comments about non-white, non-western cultures. In addition, many of his advocates have been confused by the metaphysical apparatus assembled in support of the valorisation of the 'face' (*le visage*). These features are understood biographically or as functionless remnants of religious beliefs or personal prejudices. I have brought the above quotation to the fore, because it is in the notion of the Idea and its employment in a neo-Kantian fashion that one can see how these two problems are related – the otherness of the Other is not given, transcendental or universal – its interpretation as such depends on the 'interposition of ideas'. My suggestion is that these ideas in Levinas should be understood in the neo-Kantian context of both Franz Rosenzweig and the cited Hermann Cohen<sup>1</sup>.

In Cohen's 'critical idealism' the idea is understood in the form of the hypothesis, which is a search for ground via the activity of thought<sup>2</sup>. This production of the idea allows the verification of concepts and the critical grounding of being in this process. Taking his cue from Kepler, who is understood to inaugurate 'authentically scientific idealism', Cohen writes:

'Being is not grasped as an immediate datum – a prejudice on which sensualism is founded – but it is thought as a universal project, as a problem that scientific research must solve and whose reality it must prove. As a hypothesis, the idea is then by no means the solution of the problem, but only the exact definition of the problem itself.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'It is too often forgotten, when one is interested in Husserl and Heidegger, that this neo-Kantian sequence has largely determined the context *in* which, that is to say also *against* which, Husserl's phenomenology, later the phenomenological ontology of the early Heidegger (who, besides, succeeded Cohen in his Marburg chair ... ), in a way arose: against neo-Kantianism and in another relation to Kant.' Jacques Derrida 'Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German' [1989] translated by Moshe Ron in *Acts of Religion* edited by Gil Anidjar (New York & London, Routledge, 2002), pp. 137-188; p. 140. For the dominance of neo-Kantianism in the France of the early twentieth century, see Vincent Descombes *Modern French Philosophy* [1979] translated by L. Scott-Fox & J. M. Harding (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980). And the discussion in Caygill's first chapter [especially *L&P* 9 ff.].

<sup>2</sup> In this regard see Plato's *Meno*. 'Meno' in *Meno and Other Dialogues* translated by Robin Waterfield (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 99-143; pp. 124-25.

<sup>3</sup> *Deutschum und Judentum* §4 cited by Derrida in 'Interpretations at War', p. 155.



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The idea is originary [*ürsprünglich*] in that it sets the test it itself must undergo. The privileging of the Idea as that which orients the *task* (*Aufgabe*) of practical philosophy depends for its *justification* or *validity* on a peculiar temporality. The idea receives its justification from a future transformation of the given by that very idea (the given is no longer that which distinguishes knowledge from thinking as in Kant since the forms of intuition and transcendental categories are no longer universal). Epistemologically speculative, this might appear as the philosophical equivalent of Munchausen lifting himself up by his pigtails, a form of *bootstrapping*<sup>4</sup>. As such, the key question regards the *source* of the ideas. For both Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig (who ‘is too present in [*Totality and Infinity*] to be cited’ [*TI* 28]), and as we shall see, Levinas himself, that source is Judaism. The religious tradition bespeaks an experience that is self-consciously appropriated to guide practical philosophy. But its cultural determination means that insight into its ‘profound experience’ could be limited: the special *idea* of the face might not be open to all cultures.

The idea that strikes or *fixes* the thinker is not a sublime object, but the face – this is a correction of Cohen<sup>5</sup>. And, conversely, the face is *not given in phenomenality*, but is an *idea*; an idea that brings us to, or *brings about* (and this difference will trouble us throughout the thesis), a region where beings have a face. The alter [*autre*] is transformed into the Other [*Autrui*]; the different, into the idea of the infinite or *better*. That is to say, the Other is not another person, a concrete person who is amenable to experience. The Other is produced, *happens*, through the practical ethics or politics of subjects. The Other orients

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<sup>4</sup> This justification, suspended until its future completion, is the inverse of Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*, where the cause is produced after the effect – here the privileged orientation is *anticipation* for that which is still to come. Cf. Rudi Visker *Truth and Singularity* pp. 322-23. Derrida: ‘This thought calls upon the ethical relationship – a nonviolent relationship to the infinite as infinitely other, to the Other – as the only one capable of opening the space of transcendence and of liberating metaphysics. And does so without supporting ethics and metaphysics by anything other than themselves, and without making flow into other streams at their source.’ [*VM* 102]

<sup>5</sup> ‘Philosophy itself is identified with the substitution of ideas for persons, the theme for the interlocutor, the interiority of the logical relation for the exteriority of interpellation. Existents are reduced to the neuter state of the idea, Being, the concept.’ [*TI* 88]



## Chapter 1 *Totality and Infinity* 1 – Separation and Transcendence

being because it creates a value which drives and elevates practical reason, such that it is no longer satisfied with being and so aims at the beyond: the Other has meaning *only through me* [TI 39-40].

But, for Levinas, the face as idea (of the infinite) is explicitly that which has to be brought into the ‘Western’ philosophical tradition from Judaism. This particularity does not just mark out Jewish ‘teaching’ or doctrine (*Lehre* in Cohen and Rosenzweig) from the West but also from the ‘Orient’ and from ‘underdeveloped Africa’. Not that this means that Judaism is not of universal import, nor that ‘Judaism’ here is straightforwardly identified with a religious particularism, but that there are material, socio-linguistic and cultural conditions that act as obstacles to its universal generalisation.

Robert Bernasconi had raised precisely this issue of ‘cultural encounter’ in his essay, ‘Who is my neighbor? Who is the Other?’<sup>6</sup>. He is perplexed by the manner in which Levinas draws on Husserl and, in particular, his failure to be ‘scandalized’ by the latter’s valorisation of Europe and its thought (as Greek inheritance) given that Levinas’s project seemed to be directed against a certain complacency in Greek thought<sup>7</sup>. Citing two interviews where Levinas had limited ‘serious’ thought to the Bible and the Greeks – the rest, all else, is ‘dancing’<sup>8</sup> – Bernasconi feels compelled to separate off such comments from the seriousness of Levinas’s *philosophical work*: ‘... it would be a mistake to assume that the philosophical texts conceal behind their complexity the same appalling message that is said so directly in the interviews.’<sup>9</sup>

While the encounter with the Other *as developed* may not be ‘sufficiently

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Bernasconi ‘Who is my neighbor? Who is the Other? Questioning “the Generosity of Western Thought”’ in *Ethics and Responsibility in the Phenomenological Tradition* (Ninth Annual Symposium of the Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center) (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1992), pp. 1-31.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Interview transcripts are cited at *op. cit.* p. 14. See also Levinas’s interview comments: ‘I often say, though it’s a dangerous thing to say publicly, that humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated; all the rest – all the exotic – is dance.’ Raoul Mortley (edited) *French Philosophers in Conversation* (London, Routledge, 1991), p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> *op. cit.* p. 14.



nuanced as to be able to welcome the Other in his or her ethnic identity beyond the prejudices that divide ethnic groups'<sup>10</sup>, the work contains 'the most promising resources for addressing the enigma of persecution, hatred, and violence'<sup>11</sup>. The gaze of the Other is understood as interrupting egoistic complacency and this can lead to the critical addressing of my unquestioned attachment to my own cultural values. However, the crucial point lies in Levinas's *interpretation* of this interruption that reads it as an encounter with *precisely such an Other* – a secularization of the Judaeo-Christian idea that humankind is made in the image of God. Rudi Visker is right to note that the 'idea of the west' is more central than Bernasconi admits<sup>12</sup>, because the 'west' is the cradle of the strong notion of the individual<sup>13</sup>.

Some might balk at my use of 'interpretation' above. After all, is not the proximity of the Other prior to all representation and hence interpretation – am I not chosen prior to any choice on my part? Two observations:

1. In *Totality and Infinity*, the face, as face of the Other (*le visage d'autrui*) is precisely that which confounds ontology. It is the point at which phenomenological analysis breaks up: it does not affect us on the basis of a concept, it is therefore *not experiential or perceptible*<sup>14</sup>. The face, as the face of the Other, is the encounter with the *idea of the infinite*.
2. Unlike Husserl, Levinas's take on phenomenological methodology eschews any *transcendental* feature. There is no generic notion of humanity at work, *no analogical apperception*, such that the results of my phenomenological description adequately uncover other subjects. There is no *Einfühlung*: the insistence on metaphysical *pluralism* means that any

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p. 21-22.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Truth and Singularity* p. 348.

<sup>13</sup> And even the injunction, 'Thou Shalt Not Kill'. 'Peace and Proximity' [1984] translated by Simon Critchley with Peter Atterton & Graham Noctor in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* edited Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 161-169; p. 164.

<sup>14</sup> See Sanford *Metaphysics of Love* pp. 11-12.



mention of everyday experience must ask: ‘for whom?’ That is, the moment of “*interpretation*” may be prior to representation in that it is culturally determined<sup>15</sup>.

Any thought of a ‘brute fact’ of moral experience described by Levinas (and yet somehow forgotten by other philosophers) misses the mark in these two respects<sup>16</sup>.

‘The face is abstract. ... But the abstractness of the face is a visitation and a coming which *disturbs* immanence without settling into the horizons of the World. Its abstraction is not obtained by a logical process starting from the substance of beings and going from the individual to the general. On the contrary, it goes toward those beings but does not compromise itself with them, withdraws from them, ab-solves itself. Its wonder is due to the *elsewhere* from which it comes and into which it already withdraws. ... And Sartre will say that the Other (*Autrui*) is a pure hole in the world – a most noteworthy insight, but he stops his analysis too soon. The Other proceeds from the absolutely Absent, but his relationship with the absolutely Absent from which he comes *does not indicate, does not reveal*, this *Absent*; and yet the *Absent* has a meaning in the face.’ [MS 59-60]

As Sandford has emphasised, transcendence is necessary here, in Levinas’s terms for there to be anything such as meaning at all: ‘Morality does not belong to culture: it enables one to judge it; it discovers the dimension of height. Height ordains being.’ [MS 57] In this way, our understanding of Levinas’s ‘ethics’ must be completely transformed<sup>17</sup>.

Far from a simple framing device, by opening *Totality and Infinity*, with reference to the manner in which war ‘renders morality derisory’ [TI 21], peace becomes central. The justification of the notion of the Other as idea orienting practice will lie in its ability to manifest its excellence in the institution of a new

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<sup>15</sup> ‘The world is not suffering from a lack of ethical systems. To exist in society is to find an ethics already in place.’ Robert Bernasconi ‘The Ethics of Suspicion’ *Research in Phenomenology*, Volume XX (1990), pp. 3-18; p.9.

<sup>16</sup> See Bauman *Postmodern Ethics* p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> ‘The point is that the experience of the Other is the condition of possibility for philosophy insofar as it is another way of referring to transcendence. This also means that ‘ethics’ as the presupposition of and motivation for philosophy *is not philosophy itself*. Not only is it not the case that Levinas’s philosophy is *an* ethics, ‘ethics’ itself or ‘the ethical’ is not the main aim or even the main category of Levinas’s philosophy.’ *Metaphysics of Love* p. 27.



form of peace<sup>18</sup>. In this way, Levinas privileges practical reason. To privilege theoretical knowledge is to remain bound within the finite, within being and, on Levinas's reading, subject to war. However, the material and cultural constraints of the encounter with the Other restrict the guiding idea to the prosperous inheritors of the Judaeo-Christian legacy.

From this perspective the initially abstruse analyses of the family, fraternity and fecundity assume a central importance: 'the erotic and the family ... ensure to this life ...the *infinite time of triumph* without which goodness would be subjectivity and folly' [TI 280] [my emphasis]. The justification of speculative practice is assured only through the 'convergence of morality and reality' in this infinite time [TI 306].

### From Participation to Egoism

'Egoism, enjoyment, sensibility, and the whole dimension of interiority – the articulations of separation – are necessary for the idea of Infinity, the relation with the Other which opens forth from the separated and finite being. Metaphysical Desire, which can be produced only in a separated, that is, enjoying, egoist, and satisfied being, is then not derived from enjoyment.' [TI 148]

The encounter with the Other has conditions set upon it. Who encounters what? A separated being, an *egoist* with an interiority, encounters a relation determined by the idea of infinity. Both these terms, separation and egoism are developed thematically in *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas advances a theory of levels or planes of being with four stages. These are:

1. Participation;
2. Separation 1 – Proletarian;

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<sup>18</sup> This thesis concurs with Miguel Abensour's insistence on Levinas as a new theorist of the State, contesting the terrain of Hegel and Hobbes. 'L'Etat de la justice', *Magazine Littéraire* 419 (April 2003), pp. 54-57. 'But it is very important to know whether the state, society, law, and power are required because man is a beast to his neighbour (*homo homini lupus*) or because i am responsible for my fellow. It is very important to know whether the political order defines man's responsibilities or merely restricts his bestialities.' Emmanuel Levinas 'Ideology and Idealism' [1972-5] translated by Sanford Ames & Arthur Lesley in *The Levinas Reader* edited by Seán Hand (Oxford, Blackwell, 1989), pp. 235-248; p. 247-48.



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3. Separation 2 – Egoism;
4. Desire for the Other – the “ethical”.

It is a little unclear whether the proletarian and the egoist actually ‘exist’ at different levels – they are distinguished in that, in egoism, the separated being’s needs are *all* satisfied. Even if the relation with the Other ‘grounds all possible relations in the world’ (and *Totality and Infinity* is much less clear on this than *Otherwise than Being*<sup>19</sup>), one would still have to account for that stage *before* the I *became aware* of this structure: it is this insight that will underlie the analysis of the encounter with the Other in *shame*; the Other will *teach me what I am*: an unwarranted usurpation in being.

There is some debate in the secondary literature regarding what these stages amount to. Discussing this analysis of ‘being in the world’, Sandford argues that this account cannot be read ‘as a chronicle of man’s life in and movement beyond the state of nature’; she holds that it cannot be ‘anthropological history’<sup>20</sup>. Richard A. Cohen, in his introduction to the English edition of *Time and the Other*, suggests that Levinas is developing a genetic phenomenology here<sup>21</sup>. In fact, it is more likely that Levinas is contributing to something like a philosophical anthropology. Not only is the account of participation, and its connection to the anonymous *il y a* of existence, bulwarked with reference to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, but Levinas consistently draws on Émile Durkheim for the notion of the sacred<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Indeed, we will argue in Chapter 4 that it is a *dissatisfaction* with this account of separation that leads Levinas to move to *proximity* and the ‘Other in me’ prior to my self.

<sup>20</sup> *Metaphysics of Love* pp. 42-3.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Translator’s Introduction’ in *Time and the Other* [1947] translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1987), pp. 1-27. Hereafter abbreviated to *T&O* followed by page reference.

<sup>22</sup> See *T&O* 42 and the essay by Levinas ‘Lévy-Bruhl et la philosophie contemporaine’ [1957] in *Entre nous* (Paris, Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1991), pp. 49-63. Husserl wrote a letter to Lévy-Bruhl (11 March 1935). The interpretation of this letter is the subject of a debate between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida over phenomenological method. Husserl *Briefwechsel: Band VII* edited by Karl Schuhmann & Elizabeth Schuhmann (Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), pp. 159-64. Merleau-Ponty ‘The Philosopher and Sociology’ in *Signs* [1960] translated by Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 98-113; pp. 107-8. Derrida ‘Introduction to *The Origin of Geometry*’ [1962] translated by John P. Leavey in *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry: An Introduction* (Lincoln, NA & London, University of Nebraska



Caygill has illustrated the importance of Durkheim in Levinas's work and insists that his categories 'persist' in *Totality and Infinity* [L&P 11] as a way in which to bring together anthropology and phenomenology to uncover the 'elementary forms of experience' [L&P 32]. In *Ethics and Infinity*, a set of interviews with Phillipe Nemo, Levinas emphasises the importance of Durkheim's 'eidetic of society':

'Durkheim, a metaphysician! The idea that the social is the very order of the spiritual, a new plot in being above the animal and human psychism: the level of "collective representations" defined with vigor and which opens up the dimension of spirit in the individual life itself, where the individual alone comes to be recognized and even redeemed. In Durkheim there is, in a sense, a theory of "levels of being", of the irreducibility of these levels to one another, an idea which acquires its full meaning within the Husserlian and Heideggerian context.'<sup>23</sup>

This is a dense paragraph containing much that might escape casual perusal. The connection of the spiritual and the social as the constitution of a new level of being is, in addition, the level at which the individual might be *redeemed*. It is this understanding of transcending the animal condition that underlies the desire to get *beyond being*. These levels of being gain an autonomy while commencing from those below<sup>24</sup>. That this might be intended as a historical interpretation, can be seen in Levinas's description of this level of participation as the level of *primitive mentality*, before there is any light [E&E 60-1].

The most basic level is understood as sacred or participation. If Durkheim presents the sacred as investing the collective representations of any community [L&P 57-8], Lévy-Bruhl is seen by Levinas as an important correction since his

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Press, 1989), pp. 23-153; pp. 111-15. Hereafter abbreviated to *Origin* followed by page reference.

<sup>23</sup> *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* [1982] translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1985), pp. 26-7. Hereafter abbreviated to *E&I* followed by page reference.

<sup>24</sup> This understanding of the social as autonomous level appears to sanction the avowed break from the either-or of Eleatic philosophy: being or not-being. But one might question the sophistication of Levinas's conception of ideality given that he understands Husserl as a 'Platonic realist'. Emmanuel Levinas 'The Work of Edmund Husserl' [1940] in *Discovering Existence with Husserl* edited & translated by Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1998), pp. 47-87; p. 57 & 86. Hereafter abbreviated to *DEwH* followed by page reference.



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work contributes to modern philosophy's 'ruin of representation' and destruction of substance so that the classical understanding of exteriority as neutral being is overcome<sup>25</sup>. The world is not an object veiled by representations, collective or otherwise, but a field of forces where the human being maintains itself as the product of an event of capture by sensation<sup>26</sup>. Such an engagement with concrete environments and landscapes is anterior to *and orients* representation which appears *after* in the formation of egoism *qua* separation<sup>27</sup>. This fundamental structure is uncovered by Lévy-Bruhl's empirical assemblage of a mass of anthropological facts about primitive mentality<sup>28</sup> where that structure is more visible than it is in 'ours' – *mentalité moderne*<sup>29</sup>.

"Separation", which in earlier accounts was called "hypostasis", is presented as that escape from participation [TI 90] – the possibility to withdraw from being and hence relate differently to it. In the later work it will be transformed into *Désintér-essé*: disinterested from being (*esse*), rather than disinterested<sup>30</sup>.

Separation is the production of inner life; a system whose degree of autonomy is proportional to its power to maintain its interiority, built from instinct, tastes, and, potentially, reason<sup>31</sup>. It is characterized as action, which, as memory that

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<sup>25</sup> 'Lévy-Bruhl et la philosophie contemporaine' p. 52 & 58.

<sup>26</sup> 'C'est que l'exister même de l'être ne se déroule pas comme subsistence tranquille de la subsistence, mais comme emprise et possession, comme un champ de forces où l'existence humaine se tient, où elle est engagée, à laquelle, pourrions-nous déjà dire en termes de Lévy-Bruhl, elle participe. Le saisissement du sentiment est la mesure exacte d'un tel événement.' Ibid. pp. 52-3.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 60.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 52.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 62. Cf. Heidegger *Being and Time* [1927] translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford, Blackwell, 1978), §11 'The Existential Analytic and the Interpretation of Primitive Dasein' pp. 76-7.

<sup>30</sup> 'The humanity in historical and objective being, the very breakthrough of the subjective, of the human psychism in its original vigilance or sobering up, is being which undoes its condition of being: dis-inter-estedness. ... The ontological condition undoes itself, or is undone, in the human condition or uncondition. To be human means to live as if one were not a being among beings. As if, through human spirituality, the categories of being inverted into an "otherwise than being".' [E&I 100]

<sup>31</sup> 'Activity does not derive its meaning and its value from an ultimate and unique goal, as though the world formed one system of use-references whose term touches our very existence. The world answers to a set of anonymous finalities which ignore one another. To enjoy without utility, in pure loss, gratuitously, without referring to anything else, in pure expenditure – this is the human. There is a non-systematic accumulation of occupations and tastes, equidistant from



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masters the past, is the pre-condition for representation and reflection<sup>32</sup>. This interiority is the ‘refusal to be transformed into a pure loss figuring in an alien accounting system’ [TI 54-6] and is sometimes glossed as *virility*. Through labour, enjoyment and satisfaction, the world loses its alien quality [TI 129]. It is at this level of separation from being, in the constitution of the I, that Levinas’s understanding of pluralism, a plurality ‘required for conversion’ [TI 59] to the Other, is enshrined; the individualised separation from being obeys no universal law: ‘Only in this way does becoming acquire the value of an idea radically opposed to the idea of being, does it designate the resistance to every integration expressed [*traduit*] by the image of the river [*fleuve*] .... A notion of becoming destructive of Parmenidean monism is acquired only through the singularity of sensation.’ [TI 60]

Egoism is understood as the triumph of separation, separation fulfilled<sup>33</sup>. Its *happiness* is a tranquillity and a ‘new glory above substantiality’. That is, egoism is *already* a level beyond ‘the plenitude of being’ [TI 113]. But this egoism is not yet ethically attuned to exteriority, since in its self-reliance the world it constructs is a world-for-it. Only free beings can be strangers to one another [TI 73], but for free beings to encounter each other as *another* free being, and not simply a means to its own ends, the encounter with the Other is required [TI 68]<sup>34</sup>.

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the system of reason, where the encounter with the Other opens the infinite, and from the system of instinct, anterior to separated being, anterior to being veritably torn, separated from its cause, nature.’ [TI 133-34]

<sup>32</sup> We see here a legacy of Levinas’s debt to Bergson’s notion of active memory.

<sup>33</sup> If this reading of Levinas holds up to scrutiny, then it should be extended by comparing such a phenomenological anthropology with the express reservations presented by Derrida in his essay ‘The Ends of Man’. Moreover the comments there regarding the first generation of Husserl and Heidegger reception – that it removed everything that was not amenable to anthropological description – could be connected to an observation made in the 1990 preface to Derrida’s dissertation where he presents his ‘dialectical escalation’ of phenomenology as ‘going further’ than Trần Duc Thao and Jean Cavallès. What is relevant here is that these two were considered more important than ‘Levinas, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur’ all of whom might be understood to constitute the ‘first generation’, whilst the first two turn back to Husserl’s treatment of objectivity and scientificity. ‘The Ends of Man’ [1968] translated by Alan Bass in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago, University of Chicago, 1982), pp. 109-136. Jacques Derrida *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl’s Philosophy* [1954, 1990] translated by Marian Hobson (Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. xv.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone. Not against the Others, not “as for me...” – but entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate – without ears, like a hungry stomach.’ [TI 134]



### Separation, Ideas and Ideology

The peculiar structure of separation means that it is not simply produced through something like Hegel's 'formative activity'. Its multiplicity also exhibits different ideas through which the separated being understands that situation: the elementary forms 'prefigure meaning of adventure that the soul will face in the world'<sup>35</sup>. Levinas emphasises that 'there is no natural religion' but links 'ontological production' to a moment of ideation [TI 117]: 'Its power for illusion – if illusion there was – constitutes its separation.' [TI 55]

The most common terms used in this context are 'paganism', 'atheism', 'barbarism', and 'idealism'. Heidegger's ontology and *tyranny* is understood to be rooted in 'pagan moods', where obedience to Being is obedience to the anonymous [TI 46-7]. In his early essay on the philosophy of Hitlerism, Levinas claims to uncover the pagan philosophy which is generated out of the telling inflections given to the ideas of freedom and destiny.

'It is to a society in such a condition that the Germanic ideal of man seems to promise sincerity and authenticity. Man no longer finds himself confronted by a world of ideas in which he can choose his own truth on the basis of a sovereign decision made by his free reason. He is already linked to a certain number of these ideas, just as he is linked by his birth to all those who are of his blood. He can no longer play with the idea, for coming from his concrete being, anchored in his flesh and blood, the idea remains serious.'<sup>36</sup>

We see here a possible connection to Durkheim's notion that society is constitutive for moral experience<sup>37</sup> from which we should draw out three points:

1. Ideas are anchored in the concrete being of the social;
2. Opposed to consanguinity, and ideas of such ilk, an equally serious idea must be presented – the Idea of metaphysical pluralism oriented by the infinite.

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<sup>35</sup> Levinas 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism' [1934] translated by Séan Hand *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Autumn 1990), pp. 62-71; p. 64.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 70.

<sup>37</sup> See Gillian Rose *Hegel contra Sociology* (London, Athlone Humanities Press, 1981), pp. 15-16.



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3. The trope of election prior to individual choice – ideas seize us from the first.

In contrast to the pagan mode, the ‘atheist’ is a complete break from being understood as rootedness – a positing *prior* to the possibility of idealism: ‘The soul, the dimension of the psychic, being an accomplishment of separation, is naturally atheist. By atheism we thus understand a position prior to both the negation and affirmation of the divine, the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as I.’ [TI 58] The precariousness of separation is such that it depends on ideas to shore up its hypostatization; it follows therefore that the ethical level, instigated by the Other, resting as it does on the separated being’s ability to relate to exteriority, will be even more precarious. Before turning to this notion of the Other, there is a stage we have so far neglected: the importance of the dwelling and the *feminine* Other.

### **The Feminine Other: Dwelling, Love, Fecundity**

The notion of interiority in the separated being receives its concrete form and condition in the dwelling. Intended as a palimpsest, overwriting Heidegger’s account, it institutes the alterity of the Other in the very process of separation. The domicile is not equipment, it is the primary appropriation of the elemental [TI 37, 131, 159]; the home allows a ‘world’ to be formed [TI 152]. There is no enjoyment without the intimacy of the dwelling, where the absurdity of anonymous existence is overcome [TI 139-40]. But this intimacy depends on the intimacy with *someone* [TI 152], the *feminine*.

‘Recollection and representation are produced concretely as *habitation* in a dwelling or a Home. But the interiority of the home is made of extraterritoriality in the midst of the elements of enjoyment with which life is nourished. This extraterritoriality has a positive side. It is produced in the gentleness [*douceur*] or the warmth [*chaleur*] of intimacy, which is not a subjective state of mind, but an event in the oecumena of being – a delightful “lapse” [*défaillance*] of the ontological order. By virtue of its intentional structure gentleness comes to the separated being from the Other. The Other precisely *reveals* herself [*se révèle*] in her alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness.’ [TI 150, Tel 161] [translation modified]



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This *chez soi* amounts to the interruption of time, ‘the peaceable welcome’, the creation of a domestic temporality, ‘in which the separated being can recollect itself [*se recueillir*], thanks to which it *inhabits*, and in its dwelling accomplishes separation. Inhabitation and the intimacy of the dwelling which make the separation of the human being possible thus imply a first revelation of the Other.’ [TI 151]

The feminine face is the ‘first revelation of the Other’ in the very process of separation<sup>38</sup>: the process of separation requires that the world be ‘*already human*’ through an intimacy *with someone*: ‘The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation.’ [TI 155]<sup>39</sup> The home enables a ‘new energy’: that of withdrawal from being and relation with something *I do not live from*: erotic love is distinguished in this manner from need and is ontologically crucial [TI 169-70]. Moreover, the dwelling becomes the very condition of possibility for hospitality, which will be needed to *consummate* the encounter with the other Other<sup>40</sup>. One could here draw a comparison with Aristotle for whom ‘it is impossible to do fine deeds without any resources’<sup>41</sup>.

The foregoing discussion of the feminine Other draws in large part from Sandford’s work in *Metaphysics of Love*<sup>42</sup>. That analysis is decisive for demonstrating the secondary role according to the feminine Other, whose Otherness is ‘qualified’ as ‘discreet’, who is addressed with the familiar, ‘*tu*’ [TI 155]. She is not the indiscreet Other ‘who shatters my ego’, who teaches, who comes from height: the only reference to analogical apperception in *Totality and*

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<sup>38</sup> Rudi Visker presents Levinas as utilising the ‘battle-cry’, ‘no privacy!’. But this is only of consequence after the concrete privacy of separation (*Truth and Singularity* p. 11). There is no discussion of the feminine other in Visker’s work. Incidentally, it is here that Adorno’s discussion of interiority in Kierkegaard may have some critical purchase on Levinas. Theodor Adorno *Kierkegaard: The Construction of the Aesthetic* [1933] translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 49 ff.

<sup>39</sup> As such, Levinas’s attempt to rebut any accusation that the home requires a real woman is doomed [TI 156-7].

<sup>40</sup> ‘The relation with infinity remains as another possibility of the being recollected in its dwelling. The possibility for the home to open to the Other is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows.’ [TI 173]

<sup>41</sup> Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* translated by J.A.K. Thomson revised edition (London, Penguin, 1976), p. 79-80.

<sup>42</sup> op. cit. pp. 43 ff.



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*Infinity*, normally rejected throughout, is with respect to the feminine face [TI 262-3].

There is a double-coding of even this *discretion*: the woman is analysed as either the homemaker or the ‘instrument of pleasure’<sup>43</sup>. The home produces the possibility of welcome, but love opens the possibility of self-sufficient complicity, indecency ‘forgetful of the universe’ [TI 213]. The danger of solipsism, return to animality, ‘complacency’ in pleasure [*com-plaisance*], and chaotic equivocation are all possibilities opened here, since there is lacking the frankness and *truth* of language [TI 260 ff.].

‘Equivocation constitutes the epiphany of the feminine – at the same time interlocutor, collaborator and master superiorly intelligent, so often dominating men in the masculine civilization it has entered [*où il est entré*]<sup>44</sup>, and women having to be treated as woman [*devant être traitée en femme*], in accordance with rules imprescriptible by civil society [*société policée*].’ [TI 264, *TeI* 295-96]

Unremarked in the transliteration of *imprescriptible* is a French legal term indicating that the law is without statute of limitation: woman’s secondary status cannot pass away after a determinate period.

Yet despite these dangers, this ‘love that issues in no concept’, this ‘voluptuosity’<sup>45</sup> is redeemed by virtue of fecundity: ‘the encounter with the Other as feminine is required in order that the future of the child comes to pass from beyond the possible, beyond projects.’ [TI 267] We are here in agreement with Sandford’s conclusions: the ‘event of fecundity is ontological accomplishment or realization of the beyond’<sup>46</sup>. Without this appearance of transcendence in the world, the good would not be possible: only thus is infinite time opened<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> See here Sandford’s discussion of Levinas’s references to Léon Bloy’s *Lettres à sa fiancée* (*Metaphysics of Love* pp. 52-3).

<sup>44</sup> The masculine pronoun *il* refers to *le féminin*. Several passages relevant to this discussion become impossible to follow in Lingis’s translation because *il*, *le*, *son* and *sa* are translated into English as ‘he’ and ‘his’ instead of relating to the ‘feminine’.

<sup>45</sup> As Derrida notes, these analyses are tied to a unabashedly masculine point of view [*Adieu* 39].

<sup>46</sup> *Metaphysics of Love* pp. 80-1.

<sup>47</sup> ‘The transcendence of the Good – accomplished in/as fecundity – is the foundation for the philosophy of the ethical or religious relation. Furthermore, the elaboration of this in the terms of a basically Platonic movement through eros to procreation in/of the Good reveals transcendence



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To recap, the feminine face serves three crucial functions in Levinas's system:

1. The feminine prepares the dwelling, whose intimacy is the condition of withdrawal from the elements (the *il y a*) and hence the condition for *separation*<sup>48</sup>;
2. Erotic love is ontologically critical in that it enables a relation to something *from which I do not live*. It is not structured like need<sup>49</sup>. This gains added valency as precursor to *metaphysical* Desire;
3. Fecundity, by which the ego 'survives itself' [TI 247], the production of children, creates the 'marvel of the family': the discontinuous continuity of infinite time required for the ethical-political project: the securing of the social, *human* plane above being.

It perhaps needs to be stressed that, throughout, I am not merely uncovering a series of charges against Levinas for breaching some form of accepted political correctness. I am constructing the systematic function of these features. That Levinas pursues a form of paleonymy<sup>50</sup>, systematically reconfiguring culturally received "norms" relating to sex and gender differences *into* philosophical functions makes it impossible to separate "prejudices" from core features: in some ways, his systematization should be understood as an attempt to philosophically redeem precisely those prejudices<sup>51</sup>. Because of this, it becomes

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as, in some sense, masculine – transcendence *of* the feminine – and not merely in outward expression but structurally, fundamentally.' [ibid. p. 109]

<sup>48</sup> 'The danger is that these [domestic] limits risk dividing, not the ethical from the political, but, even before this, the pre-ethical – "inhabitation" or "feminine alterity" before the transcendence of language, the height and illeity of the face, teaching, etc. – *from* the ethical, as if there could be a welcoming, indeed a welcoming "par excellence," "in itself," *before* ethics. And as if the "feminine being" as such did not as yet have access to the ethical. The situation of the chapter "The Dwelling" and, even more, the place of the section to which it belongs ... would thus pose serious architectonic problems ...' [Adieu 38-9] Derrida's alternative suggestion – that one could read this text as a kind of feminist manifesto [Adieu 44] – seems very generous.

<sup>49</sup> Though Mosès suggests eros is simultaneously structured by desire and need, this does not seem to incorporate a full understanding of the metaphysical nature of Desire – eros is instead a bridge between the two. Mosès *Au-delà de la guerre* p. 52.

<sup>50</sup> In this, his endeavour should be compared to the paleonymy effected by German Romanticism and Idealism, converting everyday terms into a technical vocabulary.

<sup>51</sup> In his discussion of *Existence and Existents*, Caygill notes a danger located in the separation of public and private around this notion of intimacy. Developed without adequate exploration and description, he sees Levinas as naïve in believing in the *authentic* preservation of such 'pockets



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of crucial importance to examine how these features resist the analytical bracketing required to present Levinas for a feminist appropriation or, when we turn to problems of cultural difference in the next chapter, multiculturalism<sup>52</sup>.

### The Other as Master

The separated ego, secure in its dwelling with needs satisfied and the intimacy of erotic love, where the self-evidence of representations is already a positive accomplishment, has already encountered the Other as feminine welcome. But if left with this ‘discreet face’, the separated being would only remain in its separation. The ‘indiscreet face of the Other’ [TI 171] breaks with the phenomenal satisfaction of the world-for-me to produce the possibility of ‘rising from the animal condition’ [TI 149]<sup>53</sup>. This break is encountered as shock or rupture. Levinas is explicit: what produces this shock is the encounter with a master in teaching [TI 42]<sup>54</sup>. The encounter with *superiority*, and not simply a different point of view [TI 291], is that which engages my attention in such a way as to produce a relationship with exteriority through the idea of the infinite<sup>55</sup>. To encounter the ‘face’ as epiphany is to find oneself faced with a being ‘closer to God’<sup>56</sup>, who brings me more than I contain [TI 51]: that is, what is revealed exceeds my own (for-itself) existence, representation and recollection.

In contrast to the feminine, familiar ‘*tu*’, the master is the one who approaches as ‘*Vous*’ – in height. It is essential here to recognise that, within Levinas’s topography of planar being, the feminine Other and the Other as master serve

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of decency’ – it is potentially dogmatic [L&P 65]. My understanding is that it is in the operation of paleonymy – the take-up of these tropes into a system – that Levinas attempts to avoid such dogmatism.

<sup>52</sup> See Sanford’s conclusions relating to the impossibility of reappropriating these themes for feminism. *Metaphysics of Love* pp. 129-140.

<sup>53</sup> Because of this distinction between Other as feminine and the Other as master, I will use masculine pronouns in relation to the latter.

<sup>54</sup> ‘*Il lui faut, pour accéder à la transcendance, un choc venu de dehors, celui que produit en elle le surgissement d’autrui.*’ Mosès *Au-delà de la guerre* p. 64.

<sup>55</sup> As Caygill stresses, this is a relation with exteriority which does not reduce to death or absorption into that exteriority [L&P 27].

<sup>56</sup> Levinas ‘Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite’ [1957] translated by Alphonso Lingis in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers. 1987), pp. 47-59; p. 56.



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two different functions: there is no experience without the feminine, but for that ‘cosy’ domesticity to be ruptured, and the ethical to commence, the encounter with the master is needed<sup>57</sup>. ‘To pass from the implicit to the explicit a master who evokes attention is necessary. To evoke attention is not a subsidiary work; in attention the I transcends itself. But a relation with the exteriority of the master was necessary to engage attention. Explication presupposes his transcendence.’ [TI 138]

Levinas suggests that I often pass indifferently before another person and do *not* feel the gaze<sup>58</sup>. For the trace of the face to appear, the ordinary experience must be ‘jostled’ by a presence that is not integrated into the world: a presence that can be effaced by ‘humble chores’ and ‘commonplace talk’ [MS 47]. He notes that: ‘It is not the interlocutor our master whom we most often approach in our conversations, but an object or an infant, or a man of the multitude, as Plato says.’ [TI 70]

Truth itself is made possible by relation with the *masterful* Other. Here, Levinas recalls Plato’s distinction between conversation with gods and conversation with ‘fellow-servants’ – the master is not our equal, he is like a god [TI 71]. Levinas evokes the idea of the infinite to point to this inadequation. Understood as exterior, the master is precisely that which exceeds the phenomenal and in so doing reveals my own phenomenality, calls into question my hypostasis, which now appears ‘arbitrary and violent’ [L&P 122-23]. Levinas utilises phenomenological methodology (or perhaps only its results in many places) to uncover structures which *do not reduce* to intentionality and yet have been

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<sup>57</sup> In this way, the face of the feminine Other already precedes phenomenological *Sinngebung*. In noting the use of the term ‘encounter’ with respect to the masterful Other, Derrida points out that this might be ‘prey’ to empiricism and suggests that there is a time and an experience prior to the encounter with the Other [VM 404 fn. 44], though without attending to this anthropology.

<sup>58</sup> Levinas writes in ‘Meaning and Sense’: ‘The movement toward the other, instead of completing me and contenting me, implicates me in a conjuncture which in a way did not concern me and should leave me indifferent – what was I looking for here? Whence came this shock when I passed, indifferent, under another’s gaze?’ [MS 52]



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dissimulated by intentionality [TI 26-8]<sup>59</sup>. Phenomenology describes what appears, but '*the face does not appear*' [E&I 85].

Both Sandford and Caygill have noted that the encounter with the Other as an idea of the infinite is irreducible to phenomenological analysis – it is precisely the case that exteriority cannot be posited from a phenomenological position and Levinas is careful to use phenomenology only to get so far as the 'break-up' of totality and the 'gleam' of exteriority<sup>60</sup>. Still, these are indeed 'speculative claims' that cannot be proven<sup>61</sup>, but they are not thereby brute impositions. Instead, the idea of the infinite encountered in the face and the idea of exteriority characterised by a pluralism of separated beings should be seen as affirmative metaphysical ideas<sup>62</sup>. This affirmation determines orientation, which overcomes the 'anarchic sorcery of facts' [TI 70, 99]. In this regard, the idea of the Other functions in a manner analogous to the Ideas of Reason in Kant – unification of experience through the setting of a task.

It is here the fourth, ethical stage, commences. Separation is not 'on the same plane as the movement of transcendence' [TI 148]; it is surpassed in Desire for the Other<sup>63</sup>. This extra level of being is more precarious. In *Totality and Infinity* it subsists through language: '... language can be spoken only if the interlocutor is the commencement of his discourse, if, consequently, he remains beyond the system, if he is not *on the same plane* as myself.' [TI 101] There is language only if interlocutors are separated, 'across a void', but they are exterior only *through language*. Language institutes the relation of transcendence; the Other is

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<sup>59</sup> Caygill: '... the very meaning of this excessive quality of intentional thought ... becomes the object of phenomenological inquiry: consciousness as relatum has existence as an object but as relation is transcendent or always in excess of itself' [L&P 20].

<sup>60</sup> 'Without substituting eschatology for philosophy, without philosophically "demonstrating" eschatological "truths," we can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the other [*le visage d'autrui*].' [TI 24]

<sup>61</sup> Sandford *Metaphysics of Love* p. 124.

<sup>62</sup> Rose notes a key feature of neo-Kantianism: 'Reason endows values with validity by recognizing the inner value of contents in a way which cannot be justified according to the criteria of disinterested understanding.' *Hegel contra Sociology* p. 7.

<sup>63</sup> 'The conversion of the soul to exteriority, to the absolutely other, to Infinity, is not deducible from the very identity of the soul, for it is not commensurate with the soul.' [TI 61]



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inseparable from this very event [TI 233]: the Other is ‘maintained in the expressive function of language’<sup>64</sup>.

“The other is maintained and confirmed in his heterogeneity as soon as one calls upon him, be it only to say to him that one cannot speak to him, to classify him as sick, to announce to him his death sentence; at the same time as grasped, wounded, outraged, he is “respected.” The invoked is not what I comprehend: *he is not under a category*. He is the one to whom I speak – he has only a reference to himself; he has no quiddity.” [TI 69]<sup>65</sup>

There are three points to stress here. First, this is not yet a theory utilizing the distinction between the Saying and the Said, though aspects of this relation will appear in the central concept of apology, where speaking is the coming to assistance of the word said by ‘answering for them’. This relation is instead akin to Husserl’s notion of *reactivation* [*Reaktivierung*] as found in the *Origin of Geometry*: the founding sense of an axiom can be lost in its subsequent utilization in proofs<sup>66</sup>. For Levinas, the maintenance of the relation with the Other, *as constitutive of the Other*, requires present speech, ‘recovering and deciphering the very signs its emits’ [TI 172]<sup>67</sup>.

Second, there is no pre-existing realm of transcendence to which the subject is granted access by this encounter. The encounter with the master is the *spur* to the *production of transcendence in each instance*. It insists on the infinite as given in advance would be to return to onto-theology. As Mosès insists, the ‘*geste spéculatif*’ of Levinas lies precisely in this conception of the infinite being

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<sup>64</sup> ‘... [L]anguage is spoken where community between the terms of the relationship is wanting, where the common plane is wanting or is yet to be constituted. ... Discourse is thus the experience of something absolutely foreign, a *pure* “knowledge” or “experience,” a *traumatism of astonishment*.’ [TI 73]

<sup>65</sup> ‘We are therefore radically opposed to Heidegger who subordinated the relation with the Other to ontology ... rather than seeing in justice and injustice a primordial access to the Other beyond all ontology. The existence of the Other does not concern us in the collectivity by reason of his participation in the being that is already familiar to us all, nor by reason of his power and freedom which we should have to subjugate and utilize for ourselves, nor by virtue of the difference of his attributes which we would have to surmount in the process of cognition or in a movement of sympathy merging us with him, as though his existence were an embarrassment.’ [TI 89]

<sup>66</sup> ‘The Origin of Geometry’ [1936] translated by David Carr; in *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry: An Introduction* (Lincoln, NA & London, University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp. 157-80. Hereafter abbreviated to *Ursprung* followed by page reference.

<sup>67</sup> We shall examine this in more detail in Chapter Three and, in particular, ask why Derrida did not latch onto this overt moment of ‘logocentrism’.



produced (producing itself) from out of experience (*'se produit en quelque sorte au sein même de l'expérience'*)<sup>68</sup>: *'L'Infini, quant à lui, ne se montre pas, pas même comme une absence. ... «trace d'une retraite» qu'aucune actualité n'avait précédée, et qui ne se fait présente que dans ma propre voix. En ce sens la trace de l'Infini est le témoignage que j'en donne.'*<sup>69</sup> Despite his awareness of the connections with Rosenzweig and his cogent discussion of the similarities to Kant's discussion of the sublime<sup>70</sup>, Mosès seems to deflate this paradox into metaphor, which would seem to diminish the force of this idea that the infinite does not appear to those who witness it, but rather, that witnessing *to* it shares in the very production of the infinite [AqE 186]<sup>71</sup>. My reading will resist that deflation.

Third, *l'Autrui* thereby refers to a universal possibility for the human subject, one that is maintained in language – it is therefore not to be confused with the concrete human other whom I experience. The Other appears in *discourse* not *perception*. This specifically ethical relation is mediated through economic existence, particularly hospitality, but transcends it. Therein lies its peculiar difficulties and risks. Indeed, it will be unclear from *Totality and Infinity* how far this “mediation” (I use this term in spite of Levinas's objections to bring this problem to the fore) through the lower level of being requires the transformation of that very level in order to ‘support’ the production of transcendence.

In light of these points, I need to take a detour through the current translation conventions pertaining to Levinas and the reading they support.

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<sup>68</sup> *Au-delà de la guerre* p. 15, 102. *'On n'insistera jamais assez la fonction centrale de ce paradoxe, ou de ce «geste spéculatif», dans la philosophie de Levinas.'* [ibid. p.56]. *'One can never insist enough on the central function of this paradox, or speculative gesture, in the philosophy of Levinas.'* [my translation]

<sup>69</sup> *'As for itself, the Infinite does not show itself, not even as an absence. ... “trace of a withdrawal” that no actuality had preceded, and which does not make itself present through my own voice. In this sense the trace of the Infinite is the witnessing I give of it.'* [my translation] ibid. pp.108-9.

<sup>70</sup> *'L'idée de l'infini en nous'* in *Au-delà de la guerre: trios études sur Levinas* (Paris & Tel Aviv, Éditions de l'éclat, 2004), pp. 81-118. Mosès notes that such comparisons with Kant bring Levinas back into the philosophical tradition from which he claimed to be breaking [ibid. pp.99-100].

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p. 106.



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### Translation of *Autrui* and *Autre*

It is customary to translate two key terms, *Autrui* and *Autre*, by the single English word, 'other'. To distinguish the two terms translators render *autrui* as Other with a capital O, and *autre* as other with a small o<sup>72</sup>. Confusing for the English reader is the fact that Levinas, in the French, often capitalises both terms, whilst also using both terms in lower case. Levinas tends to capitalise both terms when they operate as substantives<sup>73</sup>. He also capitalises other terms, most notably desire, and we can find sentences in *Totality and Infinity* which contain *désir*, lower case, and *le Désir*, upper case. In Alphonso Lingis's translation of one such sentence, we get 'desire engenders Desire', the definite article of *le Désir* has been effaced<sup>74</sup>. My thesis is that capitalisation of nouns marks their systematic place as metaphysical ideas *in the Kantian sense*; that this capitalisation indicates their pertinence to the 'terrain' of transcendence as distinct from the experience of the merely separated being.

There are two distinct ideas concerning the other person. One is the idea of the other person as concrete subjectivity; the second, is the Other as encountered in height: that is, as presenting the glimmer of what 'confounds ontology by being beyond being', the idea of the infinite. I take *l'Autre* with a capital A to refer to the other person as concrete subjectivity<sup>75</sup> and *l'Autrui*, again when with capital A, to refer to the encounter with the face of the other as idea of the infinite. I take *Autrui* to orient the analysis of a particular, but fundamental, possibility for human subjectivity – the experience of being taken out of a world-for-me by

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<sup>72</sup> Though Lingis, the translator of both *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, drops this convention without comment for the latter and translates both '*autre*' and '*autrui*' by 'other' in the lower case.

<sup>73</sup> Lowercase *autrui* is a normally a personal pronoun; *autre* an adjective.

<sup>74</sup> '*Poser la métaphysique comme Désir, c'est interpréter la production de 'l'être – désir engendrant le Désir – comme bonté et comme au-delà du bonheur.*' [Tel 340]

<sup>75</sup> Why this is on the terrain of transcendence will hopefully become clearer after the discussion of fraternity below. But briefly, another concrete person can only be understood as *Autre* as a result of the insight granted into the possibility for humanity in general. 'The notion of the face, to which we will refer throughout this work, opens other perspectives: it brings us to a notion of meaning prior to my *Sinnggebung* and thus independent of my initiative and power. It signifies the philosophical priority of the existent over Being, an exteriority that does not call for power or possession, an exteriority that is not reducible, as with Plato, to the interiority of memory, and yet maintains the I who welcomes it.' [TI 51] In this way, we can read the reference to *l'Autre* as the *authentic* understanding of the other human gained *after* the encounter with *l'Autrui*.



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teaching. I should emphasise that this runs counter to the convention of reading *Autrui* as referring to the other person<sup>76</sup>:

Richard Beardsworth has attended to the use of the *majuscule* and reached similar ideas in his *Derrida and the Political*:

‘... rather schematically, Levinas’s distinctions are something like the following. *Autrui* or *Autre* is the alterity of time *qua* the infinite responsibility of the ego to *autrui*. Phenomenal human beings to whom the I is responsible ... are called *autrui* (lower case). *Autrui* (upper case) is the *face* of alterity ‘in’ phenomenal human beings, such that I am always responsible to others. In other terms, *Autrui* is the ‘ad infinitum’ of *autrui*; and *l’Autre* is the alterity particular to the face, the transcendent infinite in the finite (what Levinas also designates *l’Autre* as against *le Même*).’<sup>77</sup>

I share the emphasis on infinite time structuring these concepts. However, I suggest instead that *l’Autrui* is reserved for the encounter with ‘transcendent infinite in the finite’ and that *l’Autre* marks the generalisation of this insight across ‘phenomenal human beings’ in a fraternal humanity. That is, I wish to reserve *Autrui* for that which *reveals* and *produces* exteriority.

Levinas’s phenomenology is transformed into idealist philosophy by metaphysical desire for the idea of the infinite. This idea is interpreted in the neo-Kantian sense as an affirmative idea of practical reason – that which orients the transformation of being. The infinite must be produced in the finite, or as Levinas terms it, it must be *generalised*. A society must be created which would justify the encounter with the other, which might otherwise remain an intimate delusion: thus ethics is the ‘royal road’ to transcendence [TI 29]. Only this task gives meaning to the present. It is because of this temporal projection, that Levinas describes the metaphysical as an ‘*aspiration* for radical exteriority’ – ethics is defined by its ‘transcendent *intention*’ [TI 29 my emphasis]. Under current conditions, the face cannot *ground* politics, nor can it be encompassed

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<sup>76</sup> Critchley: ‘*Autre* refers to anything which is other, this computer at which I am typing, the window panes and the buildings I can see across the street. *Autrui* is reserved for the other human being with whom I have an ethical relation, although it remains a moot point to what extent, if any, Levinasian ethics is capable of being extended to non-human beings, such as animals.’ ‘Introduction’ *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* p. 16.

<sup>77</sup> Beardsworth *Derrida and the Political* p. 133.



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and dealt with by phenomenology (it is precisely that which is refractory to phenomenology); instead the meaningfulness of the face can only be speculatively justified on the basis of transformed future conditions.

### Production not Reflection

Here, we must strictly reject the current conflation of the idea of the Other as *Autrui* with the more familiar idea of respect for the way in which the other person exceeds my cognitive appropriations<sup>78</sup>. Levinas consistently rejects the possibility of merely reflecting upon or recording the otherness of the other in favour of the need to *effectuate* transcendence which would thereby *justify* the encounter of the face of the other. Visker has convincingly demonstrated that the face would lack sufficient authority if it were simply reduced to ‘alien characteristics’ that were objects for inexhaustible curiosity<sup>79</sup>. If this were the case, then the other would not reveal any egoism on my part. The ‘other’s claim on me’ cannot be understood from curiosity, or used as a means of checking self-perception (this would be too close to the Hegelian dialectic that Levinas opposes) but must come from a force ‘stronger than phenomenological otherness’<sup>80</sup>. Unless it is the trace of the infinite it cannot demand respect<sup>81</sup>.

Visker’s analysis can be supplemented with three quotations from *Totality and Infinity*:

‘The presence of exteriority in language, which commences with the presence of the face, is not produced [*ne se produit pas*] as an affirmation *whose formal meaning would remain without development*. The relation with the face is produced [*se produit*] as goodness [*bonté*].’ [TI 302 my emphasis]

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<sup>78</sup> With reference to the discussion in the Introduction, by reconstructing the relation to Neo-Kantianism we at the very least highlight the failure to justify the assumed understanding that currently dominates. The latter convention is largely adopted because of similarity to other debates in the English-language tradition; to re-cite the quotation from page 10 of this thesis: ‘the preconceptions with which his English hearers approached [Wittgenstein] debarred them almost entirely from understanding the point of what he was saying’.

<sup>79</sup> This is precisely the trap Critchley falls into when he describes the face (or worse, the other’s eyes) as a ‘palpable infinity that can never exhaust one’s curiosity’. Critchley ‘Introduction’ *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* p. 27.

<sup>80</sup> *Truth and Singularity* pp. 254 ff.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.* p. 283.



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‘But the transcendence of the face is not enacted outside of the world, as though the economy by which separation is produced remained beneath a sort of beatific contemplation of the Other (which would thereby turn into the idolatry that brews in all contemplation).’ [TI 172]

“The I is not a contingent formation by which the same and the other, as logical determinations of being, can in addition be reflected *within a thought*. It is in order that alterity be produced *in being* that a “thought” is needed and that an I is needed [*C’est pour que l’altérité se produise dans l’être qu’il faut une «pensée» et qu’il faut un Moi.*]. The irreversibility of the relation can be produced only if the relation is **effected** by one of the terms as the very movement of transcendence, as the *traversing* of this distance, and **not** as a **recording** of or the psychological invention of this movement. “Thought” and “interiority” are the very break-up of being and the **production** (not the reflection) of transcendence. We know this relation only in the measure that we **effect** it; this is what is distinctive about it. Alterity is only possible starting from *me*.” [TI 39-40, *Tel* 29] [Levinas’s italics, my emphasis in bold]

The key term in these gobbets is ‘*production*’ and its verbal counterpart, ‘*se produire*’. Levinas explains the use of this term, and, in particular, his play on its essential ambiguity, as follows:

*‘Il va raconter comment l’infini se produit dans la relation du Même avec l’Autre et comment, indépassable, le particulier et le personnel magnétisent en quelque façon le champ même où cette production de l’infini se joue. Le terme production indique et l’effectuation de l’être (l’événement «se produit», une automobile « se produit ») et sa mise en lumière ou son exposition (un argument « se produit », un acteur « se produit »). L’ambiguïté de ce verbe traduit l’ambiguïté essentielle de l’opération par laquelle, à la fois<sup>82</sup>, s’évertue l’être d’une entité et par laquelle il se révèle.’* [*Tel* 11]

‘[This book] will recount how infinity is produced in the relationship of the same with the other, and how the particular and the personal, which are unsurpassable, as it were magnetize the very field in which the production of infinity is enacted. The term “production” designates both the effectuation of being (the event “is produced,” an automobile “is produced”) and its being brought to light or its exposition (an argument “is produced,” and actor “is produced”). The ambiguity of this verb conveys the essential ambiguity of the operation by which the being of an entity simultaneously [*à la fois*] is brought about and is revealed.’ [TI 26]

The translator’s gloss refers to the distinction in English between the notion that ‘nature produces a man’ and evidence is produced in a court of law. But this

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<sup>82</sup> Mosès has noted the frequent use of this phrasal adverb in *Totality and Infinity* [op. cit. p. 50]. One could connect this to Derrida’s attentive reading of the recurrence of ‘*en ce moment même*’ in ‘At This Very Moment ...’ (see Chapter 5).



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distinction misses the ambiguity of agency. Better would be a translation that captures an event ‘happening’, a car ‘being produced’, an argument ‘brought forward’, an actor ‘appearing’<sup>83</sup>. The idea of the infinite happens via a subject, and is produced through a subject. It does not exist prior to or independently of its being thought<sup>84</sup>.

With regard to the last point, there is perhaps some need therefore to clarify the references made by Levinas to Descartes’s argument in the *Third Meditation* regarding the provenance of the idea of God [e.g. *TI* 49-50]. Far from being entranced by the argument that would demonstrate the exteriority of the maker from a mark that could have no other source in the mind of a finite being, Levinas there only seeks ‘... to emphasize the transcendence of the Infinite with respect to the I which is separated from it...’ and to insist that there is no *possible* corresponding object to the idea – it can only be an idea.

In discussing this, Mosès returns to the Cartesian distinction between ‘comprendre’ and ‘entendre’: ‘... *l’infini, en tant qu’infini, n’est point à la vérité compris, mais néanmoins qu’il est entendu*’<sup>85</sup>. His gloss differentiates the two senses of understanding by contrasting the ‘comprehension’ of a panoramic spectacle with the aural connotation of *entendre* – ‘being attentive to the signification of the infinite and listening out for what it signifies to us’<sup>86</sup>.

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<sup>83</sup> My thanks to Katherine Ibbett for clarification on this point.

<sup>84</sup> Caygill, in his discussion, brings to the fore the manner in which Levinas distinguishes himself from Heidegger: an act of thought is an ‘event of production’, not a disclosure of being, that is ‘simultaneously brought about and revealed’ [*L&P* 108]. ‘The welcome and hospitality of the other is the consummation of the infinity produced by the violent encounter with the other. In the first stage, subjectivity and its totality are shattered by the advent of infinity by means of the other, then they are reconstructed in the welcome and offer of hospitality extended to the other and the shattering that it brings with it.’ [*L&P* 109] My reading suggests that the private welcome of hospitality will require further political transformations to avoid the delusion of intimacy.

<sup>85</sup> ‘The infinite insofar as it is the infinite is in no way comprehended, but nevertheless it is ‘understood’.’ Cited by Mosès [op. cit. p. 84].

<sup>86</sup> ‘*Peut-on aller plus loin et dire qu’en ce sens «entendre» l’infini pourrait vouloir dire en même temps «être attentive à sa signification» et «être à l’écoute de ce qu’il nous signifie»?*’ [ibid. p. 85].



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The ‘vision’ of the face, as an event of thought rather than a theme, must be ‘consummated’ by ethics, by the welcome of the other. Again, at risk of repeating myself, I must *respond* to the face *not contemplate it* [E&I 87]<sup>87</sup>.

### **Beyond *Being and Nothingness***

In some ways, the distinction I have presented here between *Autrui*, as experience of the idea of the infinite, and *Autre*, as concrete subjectivity, might be clarified with reference to Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*<sup>88</sup>. Indeed, Visker has claimed that Levinas’s work here could be understood as an ‘ethicization of the Sartrean universe’<sup>89</sup>; that he uses all of Sartre’s concepts, oppositions and metaphors while ‘stabilizing’ the resulting intersubjectivity<sup>90</sup>. *Le regard*, the gaze or look, that ‘supplicates and demands ... is the epiphany of the face as a face’ [TI 75].

In ‘Meaning and Sense’ Levinas admits that the idea of the other’s gaze as rupture extends Sartre’s original insight [MS 60]. I would like to take my cue from this comment by suggesting a brief look at chapter 1 of the third part of *Being and Nothingness*, entitled ‘The Existence of Others’ (*L’existence d’autrui*).

This section ostensibly begins as a discussion of the traditional philosophical problem normally known within the English-language tradition as the ‘Problem of Other Minds’. Sartre proceeds to displace the entire problematic by demonstrating how the traditional positions of realism, solipsism and idealism lead to contradictory conclusions: the realist is forced into an idealist position, etc. He suggests a novel dissolution of the problem: by differentiating between an experience of the other as subject and the other as object, he displaces the

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<sup>87</sup> In producing its own object or its own truth, the subject breaks with the given. A subterranean motif of these earlier chapters, which cannot be given adequate presentation, suggests a close connection, with respect to these themes of production, between Levinas and Alain Badiou as both are framed by the conjunction of a neo-Kantian Platonism and phenomenology.

<sup>88</sup> *Being and Nothingness* translated by Hazel E. Barnes (London, Routledge, 1991). Hereafter abbreviated to *BN* followed by page reference.

<sup>89</sup> *Truth and Singularity* p. 130 fn. 32.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* p. 339.



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problematic and concludes that the traditional approach has tried to prove the existence of the other as object based on representations. In this latter case, one can only ever achieve an indirect, merely probable knowledge of the existence of the other as subject like me. But, while seemingly deflationary, he rescues the case for a direct experience of the other as subject [*autrui-sujet*]: the experience of being-seen, in particular, the experience of shame [BN 256 ff.].

Sartre therefore radically separates the experience of the Other as subject from the identification of a particular *object* as another subject [*autrui-objet*]: ‘Whether or not this consciousness exists in a separate state, the face which I see does not refer to it; it is not this consciousness which is the truth of the probable object which I perceive.’ [BN 253] As a result, the experience of the other-as-subject, in the look [*le regard*] is preserved phenomenologically as a particular, ambivalent experience of that which is in the midst of this world and beyond this world at the same time:

‘... insofar as I experience myself as looked-at, there is realized for me a trans-mundane presence of the Other. The Other looks at me not as he is “in the midst of” *my* world but as he comes towards the world and toward me from all his transcendence; when he looks at me he is separated from me by no distance, by no object of the world, but the sole fact of his nature as Other.’ [BN 270]

My suggestion is that Levinas “corrects” Sartre’s distinction of *Autrui-sujet* /// *Autrui-objet*, by making a clearer terminological distinction between *Autrui* /// *Autre* and, further, that *Autrui* makes reference to a liminal experience similar to Sartre’s *Autrui-sujet* which challenges the intra-mundane world of experience (the world-for-us). What both share is the description of an experience of that ‘which is not me’ or not ‘from me’ within my own experience. Both these encounters put naïve unreflective existence into question. However, for the Levinas of *Totality and Infinity*, the *productive* encounter which seizes me in shock is not primarily that of shame, but the encounter with the Master glossed as teaching.

It is not that the trope of shame is absent but that it is crucially displaced. The master does not catch me in a shameful act, but, rather, ‘puts in question the



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naïve legitimacy of freedom itself’ revealing the upsurge of being in separation to be *usurpation* [TI 303]. When the I feels itself to be arbitrary, that is *ungrounded*, there morality begins. Shame, is not shame for the past, but for the condition of *creatureliness* [WhO 7].

‘To discover the unjustified facticity of power and freedom one must not consider it as an object, nor consider the Other as an object: one must measure oneself against infinity, that is, desire him. It is necessary to have the idea of infinity, the idea of the perfect ... in order to know one’s own imperfection.’ [TI 84]

In this desire, something other than me is placed above my own existence<sup>91</sup>. Before this superiority, this *height*, I do not simply ‘fall under the gaze of another freedom’<sup>92</sup>, but also seek to produce *a justification for freedom itself*. That is, in contrast to the finite, ‘irrational’ freedom of *Geworfenheit*, Levinas sees the ethical as that which insists on the infinite as the means to redeem subjective existence. Wallowing in finitude is the mark of paganism and nihilism.

Let us recap and clarify here. For both Sartre and Levinas, the shock or rupture is a non-presentational relation of being which destroys the pseudo-objectivity of the for-itself to produce the ‘transcending condition of [real] objectivity’ [BN 276]: ‘Thus in the shock which seizes me when I apprehend the Other’s look, this happens – that suddenly I experience a subtle alienation of all my possibilities ...’ [BN 264-5].

But this extension is not restricted to a disagreement over the occasions which spark this experience. Where Sartre is forced to present the other-as-subject as out of reach (‘... what is certain is that I am looked-at: what is only probable is that the look is bound to this or that intra-mundane presence.’ [BN 277]), Levinas is able to attempt a possible bridge between the beyond and what is presented. Phenomenology in Sartre uncovers an impasse, an openness in the structure of subjectivity – but Levinas takes this impasse to be the site of a decision, an

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<sup>91</sup> Visker *Truth and Singularity* p. 133.

<sup>92</sup> Levinas thus describes Sartre’s account of the encounter with the Other [TI 303].



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interpretation<sup>93</sup>. It is here that phenomenology co-opts a neo-Kantian metaphysical supplement: to postulate the possibility of producing the conditions under which this separation is overcome, transformed or engenders the realm of transcendence.

Moreover, subjectivity itself is only justified in the production of this supersession. Teaching itself is double-coded. It is that which calls me into question, but also what opens the possibility for response. It calls me to justify my existence by offering my world to the Other in discourse. The ‘incessant reception of teaching’ and its response in *apology* is the very production of transcendence through ethical being [TI 203 & 295].

In these mass of figures, we see the other as ‘caught in tension between face and form’<sup>94</sup>: ‘Form – incessantly betraying its own manifestation, congealing into a plastic form, for it is adequate to the same – alienates the exteriority of the other. The face is a living presence; it is expression.’ [TI 66] But by shifting the ‘face’ to a ‘subjective field’ beyond “vision”, *social relations* (ethics) become the production of justification through connecting the form to the face. ‘[Social relations] are the original deployment of the relationship that is no longer open to the gaze ... but is *accomplished* from me to the other in the face to face.’ [TI 290]<sup>95</sup>.

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<sup>93</sup> Unfortunately I can only nod here towards a further dimension of this central issue for Levinas scholarship. It would be vital to add to this question by investigating the relation of Levinasian Ideas to the hermeneutic Interpretation of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Briefly, the existential projection of authentic being-towards-death as being-a-whole must be attested by the phenomena themselves and not simply remain an arbitrary projection – it must discover *existentiell attestation*. ‘How are these two phenomena of anticipation and resoluteness to be brought together? ... In attempting to bring resoluteness and anticipation forcibly together, are we not seduced into an intolerable and quite unphenomenological construction, for which we can no longer claim that it has the character of an ontological projection based upon the phenomena? ... Does resoluteness, in its ownmost existentiell tendency of Being, point forward to anticipatory resoluteness as its ownmost authentic possibility?’ *Being and Time* [1927] translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford, Blackwell, 1978), §61 p. 349. In the development of the book, it is then necessary to investigate the possible temporalizations of temporality to uncover *originary temporality* – this involves a repetition of Dasein-analysis [ibid. pp. 350-52]. Holding in mind this tacit critique of Husserl’s *Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, to which Levinas returns in *Otherwise than Being* (see Chapter 4), such a *repetition* could hold the key to understanding the relation between the latter and *Totality and Infinity*.

<sup>94</sup> Visker *Truth and Singularity* p. 142.

<sup>95</sup> Matthew Edgar has made the connection to Sartre and rejects interpretations that would present the Other as alter ego or thing in itself. Instead he focuses on *ethical alterity* which is beyond



### Hospitality, Apology, Eschatology

The accomplishment *in* and *of* the face to face occurs through apology and hospitality. I both speak and offer my world to the Other as its justification. Crucially, this practical slant orients ‘inner life’ in a call to ‘infinite responsibility’ [TI 245]. In this way, these modalities of action are ways of ‘making the community of the goods of this world break forth from the exclusive property of enjoyment’ [TI 76]. This ‘relationship established over things’ [TI 50] is the accomplishment of metaphysics [TI 300], but also ‘calls for confirmation’ [TI 240]. In the judgment, justice is desired – the confirmation that ‘war does not dupe morality’ [TI 21].

What form would such a confirmation or judgment take? We have already insisted upon the primacy of practical reason over theoretical reason in Levinas. This is masked in the opening pages of *Totality and Infinity* because of its presentation as an opposition between philosophy and *eschatology*. Of peace, the overarching theme of the book, there can only be an eschatology.

Philosophy is taken to proceed by evidences, from which perspective eschatology always appears as subjective illusion and lack of certainty: a branch of opinion or faith. But Levinas insists that ‘the extraordinary phenomenon of prophetic eschatology certainly does not intend to win its civic rights within the domain of thought by being assimilated to a philosophical evidence’ [TI 22].

Instead it proceeds by first demonstrating the break-up of totality within philosophy. That is, a certain phenomenology is used to find a point at which phenomenology is unable to account for its certitude [TI 25]. It is precisely the encounter with the face that marks such a point – it marks a ‘gleam of

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phenomenological description, but does not revert to “realism”. ‘Operating within the confines of the phenomenological method, we witness the limits of phenomenology in an experience that ultimately disrupts the equilibrium of experience itself. The absolutely new ethical meaning generated in the encounter cannot be constituted by the transcendental subject precisely insofar as it is *produced* as the disruption and overflowing of the subject.’ However, the metaphysics of transcendence (as opposed to transcendentality) and its production is absent as is any consideration of the difference between *l’Autre* and *l’Autrui*. Matthew Edgar ‘On the Ambiguous Meaning of Otherness in *Totality and Infinity*’ in *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*; Volume 36, 1 (January 2005), pp. 55-75; p. 68.



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exteriority’. Or, rather, there is a “vision”, an interpretation (though Levinas would resist this reading), that metaphysically reconfigures this moment of break-up as trace of transcendence.

‘The first “vision” of eschatology (hereby distinguished from the revealed opinions of positive religions) reaches [*atteint*] the very possibility of eschatology, that is, the breach of the totality, the possibility of a *signification without context*. The experience of morality does not proceed from this vision – it *consummates* [*consomme*] this vision; ethics is an optics.’ [TI 23, Tel 8, translation modified]

The reason for any resistance to interpretation is found in the *consommer* of the last line, meaning both ‘to use’ or ‘to consummate’. An interpretation as a purely *theoretical* alternative to phenomenology *is of no consequence*. Its measure is the manner in which it accomplishes *events*. Opposed to revelation as dogma, it produces its own *breach* through aiming at its *vision*. The very work of justice is necessary because it *produces* ‘the breach that leads to God’ [*pour que se produise la trouée qui mène à Dieu*] – its production is its happening [TI 78, Tel 77]. Hence, Levinas’s opposition to counter-representations of being, since such structures dissimulate the necessity of effectuation [TI 27-8]. The individual and personal are required so that the infinite occurs [TI 39, 218]. From this perspective, the status of the idea of infinity is ambiguous, since as projection its value appears to lie in the ‘maintenance’ of the idea of exteriority [TI 196] and Levinas explicitly touches on its affinity with illusion and delirium [TI 49].

Yet, the ‘privileged experience of infinity’ in the face to face would be the divine release of the world from custom. And, ultimately, Levinas argues that it is not in any sense irrational, since the very rationality of objectivity is *only a residue of practical finality from which it derives its meaning*; Levinas instigates a pragmatism in the heart of theoretical philosophy [TI 94]. We are faced with a contest over ideas and the conduct of philosophy, where what results would decide. A “philosophy” that aims at the Good – where this Good is Platonic. and hence ‘not to be traced back to any oriental wisdom’ [TI 218].



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Eschatology is presented as a prophetic mode of orientation, but one without hope for the individual self and without liberation in a mortal lifespan<sup>96</sup>. Practical philosophy will not be bound to the elevation of the given and finitude, but aims at a transforming event of being – the generalisation of the outburst (*éclat*) of exteriority in a pluralism of separated beings relating ethically.

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<sup>96</sup> Cited by Derrida at *VM* 118.



## Chapter Two

### *Totality and Infinity* 2

#### – the idea of the West and the otherness of the Other

The previous chapter outlined the fundamental structure of Levinas's account of the ethical relation beyond separated existence in *Totality and Infinity*: here, I turn to the questions raised at the very beginning: that is, are all others [*Autres*] Other [*Autrui*]? Can everyone experience the Other in its 'remoteness, alterity, and exteriority' [*TI* 34]?

Given our account of the 'stages' of being and the mechanics of separation, it is obvious that not all others encounter or are encountered as Others. The question is ill-formed; the categories do not overlap in any token-token correspondence, since the Other does not enter being in any concrete manner. The question should be: what are the conditions of possibility for the encounter with the idea of the infinite as the face of the Other?

As we shall see, the topography entails *cultural* differences. These differences are both material and socio-linguistic (or even *ideological*). We will consider each in turn, beginning with the material constraints based on the account of *need*. Can one encounter the face of the other, as infinite idea, if and only if one's material needs are met?

#### Need and Separation: the Proletarian Condition

As fourth stage on our schema, the Other, as the idea of the infinite, is encountered in the face as a rupture in *self-sufficient* enjoyment<sup>1</sup>. The phenomenality of contentment is displaced by the idea of the infinite and its concomitant new mode of being, a fully human possibility which leaves the 'plane of economy and labour' [*TI* 181]. But the free being is characterised as free from *dependency*. Thus Levinas argues that separation, the creation of a

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<sup>1</sup> 'Truth presupposes a being autonomous in separation; the quest for a truth is precisely a relation that does not rest on the privation of need.' [*TI* 61]



## Chapter 2 *Totality and Infinity* 2 – the otherness of the Other

world-for-me in enjoyment, is the precondition for the encounter with exteriority. Beyond need, the rupture can only strike the one who ‘possesses his being entirely’ [TI 104]<sup>2</sup>.

Here we may draw out a peculiar feature of Levinas’s concept of need. Need is not necessarily a privative state of the individual which must be overcome. Insofar as need is a spur to labour, it is the condition of possibility of extricating oneself from anonymous being.

‘To conceive of need as a simple privation is to apprehend it in the midst of a disorganized society which leaves it neither time nor consciousness. ... Animal need is liberated from vegetable dependence, but this liberation is itself dependence and uncertainty. An animal’s need is inseparable from struggle and fear; the exterior world from which it is liberated remains a threat. But need is also the time of labor: a relation with an other yielding its alterity. To be cold, hungry, thirsty, naked, to seek shelter – all these dependencies with regard to the world, having become needs, save the instinctive being from anonymous menaces and constitute a being independent of the world ...’ [TI 116]

There is a distinction here between vegetable dependence, animal need (instinctive being) and separation. But there is a further distinction between need ‘in the midst of a disorganized society’ and a different manner of conceiving need. Labour (and the dwelling) is the condition, the prompt, that separates human existence, and hence human need, from animality. Existents are prompted by need to labour in and on the world so as to lodge themselves in the world. The ego is established through commerce and enjoyment.

Crucially, Levinas argues that labour does not meet immediate pressing needs, but works towards overcoming the anxiety of the future by ensuring the ‘persistence of plenitude’. The need valorised by Levinas as essential to the structure of human subjectivity, is the need to create security and comfort: enjoyment is troubled only by concern for what tomorrow might bring. This futural structure constitutes the very activity of separation<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘The totality of contentment betrays its own phenomenality when an exteriority that does not slip into the void of needs gratified or frustrated supervenes. ... [it] breaks interiority by this very incommensurability.’ [TI 179]

<sup>3</sup> Here one discerns an acute differentiation of Levinas’s concept of need from that of Marx and Engels. Although the basic needs of eating, drinking, clothing and habitation are shared, for the



But Levinas introduces a ambiguity here into the concept of need. An ambiguity which led me to distinguish the egoist from the proletarian.

‘I live from the whole content of life – even from the labor which ensures the future; I live from my labor as I live from air, light, and bread. The limit or borderline case [*le cas limite*] in which need prevails over enjoyment, the proletarian condition condemning to accursed labor in which the indigence of corporeal existence finds neither refuge nor leisure at home, is the absurd world of *Geworfenheit*.’ [TI 146-7] [translation altered]

The possibility of need prevailing over enjoyment is characterised as *Geworfenheit*. In the account of the dwelling, it was precisely this absurdity or chaos that was overcome by the home. An enjoying being who prepares for what the future might bring is contrasted with the proletarian whose labours only meet pressing immediacy<sup>4</sup>. Hence we appear to have two kinds of need: the proletarian condition and the ‘normal’ condition where need finds its satisfaction and produces a fully separated being; the plane of ‘needy being’ contra the plane of ‘sabbatical existence’ [TI 104]. Importantly, since need prevails over enjoyment, the proletarian does not attain the necessary stage of egoist being. Without the ‘self-possession’ of full separation, it has no ego to rupture [TI 104]. Without the possibility of solitude and enjoyment, the proletarian cannot ‘maintain itself’ [*se tenir*] in the world. Without secure dwelling it has not encountered the feminine other, without full separation it cannot encounter the face of the Other as the idea of the infinite.

Separation from animality is not guaranteed. There is a spectrum of separation from needy to fully egoist. According to Levinas, both are for-itself, but in different ways. Levinas analyses the expression “each for himself” as characterizing the plane of separation, as defining the escape from participation.

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latter, the satisfaction of the basic needs leads to *new needs* – this is the ‘first historical act’. The temporal dimension in Levinas’s account relates only to worry regarding the continued meeting of the first needs in the future. Without this dimension of new needs, Levinas’s discussion remains at the level of the micrological concerns of the domestic accounts – determinately *petit bourgeois*. *The German Ideology - Part One* edited by C.J. Arthur (London, Laurence & Wishart, 1974), pp. 48-50.

<sup>4</sup> Caygill reads this structure in *Existence and Existents*. Time is unhinged when I have to eat ‘in order not to die’ [L&P 66], but such occasions arise – the separated being can regress to the lower condition.



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There is the for-itself of the hungry, who reduce to a “famished stomach that has no ears,” capable of killing for a crust of bread’. Against this there is the for-itself of the ‘the surfeited one who does not understand the starving and approaches him as an alien species, as the philanthropist approaches the destitute’ [TI 118]<sup>5</sup>.

The second reference to the proletarian condition in *Totality and Infinity* underlines this distinction. ‘Such is a lower proletariat which would only *cover the comfort* of the bourgeois interior and its fleshpot horizons. The totality of contentment betrays its own phenomenality when an exteriority *supervenes* that does not slip into the void of needs gratified or frustrated.’ [TI 179] [translation altered]

That is, contentment can only reveal its phenomenality once it is reached – the one who is not content can only feel envy. We could recall Aristotle’s differentiation of kinds of friends, where friendship based on mutual advantage is the lowest kind of friendship. The human who completes me or contents me by meeting a need opens only a relation of mutual advantage: in a privative society this may dominate, a world of exploitation<sup>6</sup>. We should further note that labour and enjoyment are not simply surpassed as a context for metaphysical desire: labour creates the conditions of possibility for hospitality, for the receiving and giving which characterise the authentic ethical response to the face of the other [TI 146]. Thus we must register a disagreement with Howard Caygill’s analysis of labour and need. He writes: ‘The encounter with the other preserves freedom from dissolution in material scarcity or self-destructive anxiety for the future. It opens an ‘extraterritorial’ space and time....’ [L&P 116-17]. This passage [TI 150] refers to the domestic space inaugurated by the *feminine* other.

While the encounter with the masterful other opens an ‘extraterritorial space and time’ the access to this space is determined in the last analysis by material needs:

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<sup>5</sup> The for-itself of the hungry underlies Levinas’s admonition that war ‘would result from masses that demand food as right’. [TR 133]

<sup>6</sup> ‘Food can be interpreted as an implement only in a world of exploitation.’ [TI 134]



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only free beings can be strangers to one another [TI 73]. And indeed this reveals what is so efficient about war – it destroys the conditions for bourgeois life<sup>7</sup>.

‘The ontological event that takes form in this black light is a casting into movement of beings hitherto anchored in their identity a mobilization of absolutes, by an objective order from which there is no escape. The trial by force is the test of the real. But violence does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action.’ [TI 21]

The structure of need connects the human back to the world such that the satisfied being has never secured itself *sine cura*. It is only through need, materiality, that humans can be made to play other roles. This is why the political production of peace serves the role it does. It is worth examining here the comments of Levinas regarding Marx. On the one hand, he argues against any privileged insight for the suffering masses:

‘I do not believe that the oppression that crushes the working classes gives it uniquely a pure experience of oppression in order to awaken it, beyond economic liberation, the nostalgia for a metaphysical liberation. The revolutionary struggle is divested of its true significance and its real intention when it serves simply as a basis for spiritual life, or when through its crises it must awaken vocations.’ [T&O 61]

This is consistent with our insistence that the ethical can only commence from the satisfied being<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, Levinas emphasises that the ‘true significance’ of Marxism lies in the valorisation of needs as constituting the specificity of the human: a ‘being without needs would not be happier than needy being satisfied’ [TI 146]. This approving focus on ‘economic man’ includes a nod to alienation through an observation as to how the dignity of man is compromised by things. However this understanding of the centrality of needs is undermined by its remaining within the plane of this economics: ‘[Marxism] situates itself in the perspective of the sincerity of intentions, the good will of

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<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, this then strengthens the first protocol of Caygill’s Levinas reading: the ethical is understood as a fragile response to the political – not considerations restricted to the realm of private relations [L&P 1].

<sup>8</sup> Compare this argument against the historical function of the working class with the arguments in favour of Jewish excellence: they are held to be more responsible because of what they have suffered historically. Bernasconi ‘Who is the Other? Who is the Neighbor?’ p. 24.



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hunger and thirst, and the ideal of struggle and sacrifice it proposes, the culture to which it invites us, is but the prolongation of these intentions.’ [E&E 45]

The ‘prolongation of these intentions’ remains in being and does not move towards the ethical plane. I conclude then that the ethical response can only occur when basic needs are met. How then to read Levinas’s comments on ‘the stranger, the orphan, the widow’? I would suggest the following interpretation. The stranger, the widow and the orphan are types of people *within one’s own society* whose basic needs (hunger, thirst, lack of shelter) are not met and hence are precluded from ethical experience – they are proletarian on Levinas’s definition, not yet separated.

‘The plane of the needy being, *avid for its complements*, vanishes, and the possibility of a sabbatical existence, where existence suspends the necessities of existence is inaugurated. *For an existent is an existent only in the measure that it is free, that is, outside of any system, which implies dependence.* Every restriction put on freedom is a restriction put on being.’ [TI 104] [my italics]

The political task is to combat these conditions, these *dependencies*, so as to maximise the potential for ethical response within a society. The stranger, the widow and the orphan are those who cannot be experienced as other [*Autrui*] – I cannot yet experience them in height. But in treating them as another person [*Autre*], potentially, in future, when their needs are met, they may bring me more than I contain – one day I may experience the shock that transcends my charitable interaction with them. The crux here lies in the notion of the ‘third party’ (*le tiers*) present in the encounter with the Other [TI 213]. I am called to transform their condition so that they might come to form the society of equals. This notion of fraternity is anchored in a certain reception of monotheism which will be examined in more detail later in this chapter. The idea of the ethical points to a potential even in the destitute that I am responsible for catalyzing.

### **Ideology, Idealism, the West**

If material constraints preclude some within my own society (the widow, orphan and the stranger) from the movement towards transcendence, then we can extend



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this question to relations with other cultures. And are the constraints solely material and economic? Is the possibility of transnational ethics proportional to the global extent of proletarianization? We have already read Levinas's comments on the restriction of serious thought to the Bible and the Greeks. In one of those interviews cited, Levinas decries the practice of dancing at funerals in South Africa. He asks the interviewer: 'Have you seen it? That is some way of expressing sadness!'<sup>9</sup>

This suggests that there is a *cultural* dimension to Levinas's consideration of ethical preconditions. Through this question I attempt to extend Caygill's analyses – the reading of Levinas from 'the standpoint of political judgment' [*L&P* 1] into the core of Levinas's problematic – into the foundational claims of ethics and transcendence. The political does not simply 'trouble' the remainder of his thought or remain an 'Achilles heel' – it is also that which orients the entire speculative project.

My strong claim will be that the problematic of the Other is from the beginning mobilized in a valorisation of the Judaeo-Christian legacy *against* those that come from outside Europe. That is, this is a *philosophical* question – I am not simply mobilising biographical ephemera in a forensic examination of the Emmanuel Levinas. Instead, I am insisting that the very ideas which support the systematic development of the Other are oriented by a cultural, geo-political 'diagnosis' and is inflected by a thesis on world history *in its innermost workings*.

I begin with two infamous quotations which situate this question along the axis of geo-political particularity. The first quotation is taken from a radio discussion broadcast shortly after the massacres at Sabra and Chatila of 1982. The chair, Shlomo Malka, asks Levinas whether the Palestinian is not the other *par excellence* for the Israeli. Levinas responds by insisting: 'my definition of the other is completely different'<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Cited in Robert Bernasconi 'Who is the Other? Who is the neighbor?', p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Script of the radio discussion of 28 September 1982 is given in *The Levinas Reader* edited by Seán Hand; Oxford, Blackwells, 1989; pp. 289-298. 'An apologetic response to the revelation of



The second quotation is taken from a brief essay published in 1960 on the difficult relations between China and the Soviet Union at the time. Levinas raises the question of whether there can be understanding between countries which share such different histories and develops it by asking: 'In abandoning the West, doesn't Russia [*sic*] fear drowning itself in an Asian civilisation which will continue to exist behind the visible, material reality [*le concret apparent*] of the dialectical resolution?'<sup>11</sup> [my translation]

Levinas suggests that certain 'particularities' will persist even after the achievement of the historical advance represented by the classless society. He continues: 'The yellow peril! It is not racial, it is spiritual. It is not about inferior values; it is to do with a radical strangeness, which is alien to all the density of its past, from where no voice with familiar inflection filters: it comes from a lunar or Martian past.'<sup>12</sup> Caygill describes this piece as Levinas's 'ugliest and most disturbing published work' and that it is '... difficult to imagine any circumstances in which the phrase 'the yellow peril' can not be racist', especially given the dehumanising reference to the moon and Mars [*L&P* 184]. This essay is in no sense to be understood as a 'lapse' – as will be seen, Levinas believes European excellence is located in its ideas of the infinite to which 'Eastern wisdom' has no access.

The past which blocks the Soviet Union from allying more fully with China is its 'Graeco, Judaic, Christian' past. Throughout Levinas's pieces on Judaism, we

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the other as enemy would be to distinguish here between empirical and transcendental others, and to maintain that here Levinas was speaking of the former. A harder thought is that Levinas's claim is rigorously consistent with his philosophy, which we have argued recognises the inevitability of war. To describe the other as enemy at this point is thus entirely consistent with such a reading of Levinas's ethics.' [*L&P* 192-193]

<sup>11</sup> 'En abandonnant l'Occident, la Russie ne craindrait-elle pas de se noyer dans une civilisation asiatique qui, elle aussi, subsistera derrière le concret apparent de l'aboutissement dialectique?'. 'Le Débat Russo-Chinois et la dialectique' in *Les Imprevus de l'histoire* (Montpelier, Fata Morgana, 1994), pp. 170-173; pp.171-172.

<sup>12</sup> 'Le péril jaune! Il n'est pas racial, il est spirituel. Non pas qu'il s'agisse de valeurs inférieures; il s'agit d'une étrangeté radicale, étrangère de toute l'épaisseur de son passé, où ne filtre aucune voix à inflexion familière, d'un passé lunaire ou martien.' Ibid. p. 172. A strange echo can be here discerned between China's past, and the opaque density of the elemental [*épaisseur opaque sans origine*] which is absolutely underdetermined: it has 'no zero point through which any axis of co-ordinates would pass' [*TI* 159].



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find a similar theme: this specific past constitutes the ‘excellence’ of Europe which must be preserved and extended in the face of determinate changes in historical and geo-political conditions. These modern conditions are:

- the rise and defeat of Hitlerism;
- the creation of the state of Israel in 1948;
- ‘The arrival on the historical scene of those underdeveloped Afro-Asiatic masses who are strangers to the Sacred History that forms the heart of the Judaic-Christian world.’<sup>13</sup>

In the essay, ‘Jewish Thought Today’ (1961), Levinas worries that the ‘hordes’ and ‘masses’, who come from outside Europe, threaten both to undermine the ‘new-found authenticity of Israel’ and to marginalise Jews and Christians, who could be reduced by ‘greedy eyes’ into sects squabbling over the interpretation of a few books [*JTT* 165]<sup>14</sup>. The theme of underdevelopment should concern us as a consistent term in Levinas’s thought, one which I believe should be equated to the ‘proletarian’ condition in its reference to the economics and structuring constraints of need.

The subsequent work of this chapter will focus on Levinas’s essay, ‘Meaning and Sense’, published in 1964, but written just after the publication of *Totality and Infinity*. This essay responds to Merleau-Ponty’s positive engagement with structuralist anthropology. Though Levinas praises it as the “ontology of decolonization”, he reads it simultaneously as producing not only disorientation, but also in no way averting the possibility of war [*MS* 46] (we should contrast disorientation with the orientation provided by the presentation of the face [e.g. *TI* 215]). The ontology of decolonization works negatively towards the

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<sup>13</sup>‘Jewish Thought Today’ [1961] in *Difficult Freedom – Essays on Judaism* translated Seán Hand (London, Athlone, 1990), pp. 159-166; p. 160. Hereafter references given in the text as *JTT* followed by page reference.

<sup>14</sup> ‘... but under the greedy eyes of these countless hordes who wish to hope and live, we, the Jews and Christians are pushed to the margins of history, and soon no one will bother any more to differentiate between a Catholic and a Protestant or a Jew and a Christian, sects that devour one another because they cannot agree on the interpretation of a few obscure books.’ [*JTT* 165]



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destruction of one manifestation of totalising reason, but will leave nothing constructive in its place.

This is animates the repeated critique of *structuralist* anthropology<sup>15</sup>. In contrast to the ‘anti-Platonism’ of contemporary linguistics and anthropology (which situates all meaning immanent to the particular culture, language or society), phenomenology’s value as the intuitive study of intentionality, is to interrogate this flat plurality of cultural meanings to bring out the dominant structures of subjectivity from the seemingly infinite variety of societies, languages or cultures. Levinas defends the *Judaic* concept of alterity *as* height in opposition to a notion of alterity that would be premised upon a ‘saraband of innumerable and equivalent cultures’ [MS 58]. “Greece” names a culture which produces something that enables the ‘depreciation’ of merely ‘historical cultures’ [MS 42]. For Plato (and Husserl) this is Reason; for Levinas, the West produces the idea of the ‘face’.

For Levinas, immanentism results in anarchy – there is no principle by which to judge – and cultural relativism. There is an erroneous assumption underlying anthropology: it treats human meaning *solely* as an expression of need. For Levinas, human need is not animal need precisely because it has a cultural level: meaning is not solely oriented by satisfaction (the system of ‘tastes’ equidistant from instinct and reason [TI 133-34]). Crucially, he claims that this error arises from allowing a model of *underdeveloped humanity* to determine the theoretical co-ordinates: ‘Only need taken at the level of underdeveloped humanity can give this false impression of univocity.’ [MS 45] Levinas is rebutting the possible equivalence between Western society and the tribes studied by Lévi-Strauss: that is, Levinas contests the pertinence of these analyses for appreciating an advanced humanity<sup>16</sup>. The condition of the inhabitant of the underdeveloped world will be somewhat akin to the ‘lower proletariat’, whose ‘greedy eyes’ can only envy the

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<sup>15</sup> I stress the *structuralist* since Lévy-Bruhl is championed against Claude Lévi-Strauss in so far as the former maintains a hierarchy of mentalities – the ‘modern’ is superior to the ‘primitive’, which can only be object and theme for the first and not vice versa. See ‘Lévy-Bruhl et la philosophie contemporaine’. Cf. *L&P* 211 fn.11.

<sup>16</sup> See Claude Lévi-Strauss *Tristes Tropiques* translated by John and Doreen Weightman (London, Penguin, 1976).



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outward display of consumption and satisfaction. In seeking ‘to live’, perhaps the West only appears to them as a part of their phenomenally defined world of pressing need. And that is to say nothing of their ability to meet the requirements of hospitality or their ability to understand the analysis which *shows* desire for the other to underpin ordinary experience. As we shall shortly see, this harsh sentiment underlines comments on China in ‘Meaning and Sense’.

### Phenomenology, Empathy and Anthropology

I feel it is important here to address this issue in relation to phenomenology, and, in particular, Levinas’s appropriation of it. In *Origin of Geometry*, Husserl writes:

‘Does not the undertaking of a humanistic science of “how it really was” [wie es eigentlich war] contain a presupposition taken for granted, a validity-ground never observed, never made thematic, of a strictly unassailable [type of] self-evidence, without which historical inquiry would be a meaningless enterprise? All questioning and demonstrating which is in the usual sense historical presupposes history [*Geschichte*] as the universal horizon of questioning, not explicitly, but still as a horizon of implicit certainty, which, in spite of all vague background-indeterminacy, is the presupposition of all determinability, or of all intention to seek and to establish determined facts.’ [*Ursprung* 176]

In this essay, Husserl aims to uncover the foundation of human reason shared by all. This is revealed in the move from proto-geometry to geometry as dependent on a fundamental human ‘empathy’ (*Einfühlung*). But this is supplemented by a teleology of history (according to the production of science, and the general value of scientificity), to which the historical and social sciences are themselves indebted. A historical or cultural relativism makes a claim to ‘factualness’ which ‘presupposes the historical a priori if this claim is to have meaning’ [ibid.]. Levinas has referred to this idea as exemplifying the ‘generosity of Western thought’: the abstract is seen in every human, but cultures are judged according to how far those cultures *also value the person* [MS 58]<sup>17</sup>. But this *manner* of valuing the person is not available to Levinas himself.

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<sup>17</sup> This appears to be a misreading of Husserl’s argument. The value instantiated by Europe is science – it is this that enables a teleological narrative of world time. Science expresses the eternal in humanity as a whole. See *Crisis of European Sciences*.



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As already noted, for him, there is no empathy or genus belonging to or encompassing humanity. He explicitly opposes the notion of a European teleology of reason in which individuals would participate, ‘an inward maturation of reason common to all’ [TI 219].

‘Does not a mind in speaking evoke what the other mind already thinks, both them participating in common ideas? But the community of thought ought to have made language as a relation between beings impossible. A universal thought dispenses with communication. A reason cannot be other for a reason. ... Separated thinkers become rational only in the measure that their personal and particular acts of thinking figure as moments of this unique and universal discourse. There would be reason in the thinking individual only in the measure that he would himself enter into his own discourse, that thought would ... comprehend him. But to make of the thinker a moment of thought is to limit the revealing function of language to its coherence, conveying the coherence of concepts. In coherence the unique I of the thinker volatilizes ... language would consist in suppressing the other, in making the other agree with the same.’ [TI 72-3]

The human is held to be refractory to every ‘typology’, ‘genus’, ‘classification’<sup>18</sup>. The ethical is premised upon a plurality that does away with *Einfühlung*, which is appropriate only to the level of animality (and not even participation since that is directly related to *paysage*). This presents Levinas’s “phenomenological” methodology with a problem since it cannot make any claim to transcendental status. However, perhaps the fundamental problem of phenomenology’s dependence on first person intuition lies in its requirement to shore up the phenomenologist as the apogee of human achievement. Eurocentrism is to some extent constitutive insofar as the cultural and historical place of the practitioner must be valorised if the results of *description* are to have the intended status. According to the Cartesian Meditations, phenomenology is cogent on the basis that ‘I myself am the primal norm constitutionally for all other men [*wie ich selbst konstitutiv für alle Menschen*]’<sup>19</sup>. Without even *Einfühlung*, Levinas’s

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<sup>18</sup> ‘In order that a pluralism in itself (which cannot be reflected in formal logic) be realized there must be produced in depth the movement from me to the other, an attitude of an I with regard to the Other (an attitude already *specified* as love or hatred, obedience or command, learning or teaching, etc. ...), that would not be a species of relationship in general ...’ [TI 121]

‘*Pour que se réalise un pluralisme en soi que la logique formelle ne saurait refléter, il faut que se produise en profondeur le mouvement de moi à l’autre, une attitude d’un moi à l’égard d’Autrui ... qui ne serait pas une espèce de la relation en général.*’ [Tel 126]

<sup>19</sup> *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* [23 & 25/2/1929] translated by Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1960), p. 126. Hereafter abbreviated to *CM* followed by page reference.



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relation to other cultures lacks a crucial guardrail in any historico-philosophical anthropology.

Robert Bernasconi's own reading of 'Meaning and Sense' sets it against Merleau-Ponty's essay, 'Everywhere and Nowhere'<sup>20</sup>. Here, the latter argues that an appreciation of the cultures of the East can enable us to recapture a lost sense of the relation between the body, sensibility and reason to escape such intellectual colonialism<sup>21</sup>. Bernasconi concludes with the following questions relating to the specificity of Levinas's analysis of the Other:

'But even if the encounter between cultures leads me to doubt the norms of my own culture *on the basis of* the practices of an alien culture, does that make the encounter ethical? For all the rhetoric of strangerhood, is not the Other always other than culture? Can the Other qua Other have a cultural identity?''<sup>22</sup>

Levinas's resistance to Lévi-Strauss, beyond Merleau-Ponty's understanding, does not entertain the possibility of doubting his own culture. The Other is other to culture, it uproots me from history and cultural particularity<sup>23</sup>, but this idea of the Other *has itself been produced in a unique historical configuration*. A cultural meaning which exceeds determination by need in a particular direction provides us with the means to re-hierarchicalize cultures and languages. Cultures will be judged on their ability to produce transcendence and, hence, *peace*.

In his discussion of 'Le Débat Russo-Chinois et la dialectique', Caygill writes:

'Given the title, Levinas might have been expected, when speaking of Asia, to confront Europe and its dangerous metaphysics with new sources of universality and freedom drawn from the East. That he does not even contemplate this step is one of the many mysteries of this tormented text whose political motivation becomes apparent only in its closing lines.' [*L&P* 183]

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<sup>20</sup> 'One-Way Traffic: The Ontology of Decolonialization and its Ethics' in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty* Edited by Galen A. Johnson & Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1990), pp. 67-80.

<sup>21</sup> 'Everywhere and Nowhere' in *Signs* [1960] translated by Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 126-58.

<sup>22</sup> *op. cit.* p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> 'Though of myself I am not exterior to history. I do find in the Other a points that is absolute with regard to history – not by amalgamating with the Other, but in speaking with him. History is worked over by the ruptures of history, in which a judgment is borne upon it. When man truly approaches the Other he is uprooted from history.' [*TI* 52]



I believe my reading offers a resolution to this mystery. The resources of Judaism, its ideas transcend their production in a particular conjunction. These ideas have universal applicability, but it is possible that certain cultural formations will find themselves blocked *because of their own cultural and historical inheritance*, sufficiently foreign for Levinas to describe it as ‘lunar or Martian’<sup>24</sup>.

The argument in ‘Meaning and Sense’ proceeds in transcendental fashion, taking up Husserl’s notion of an assumption underlying anthropology, but taking it in a notably different direction *since Levinas can make no appeal to “validity-ground”*. Levinas asks: what is the condition of possibility for constructing a flat ontology of cultural meaning?<sup>25</sup> And concludes that *orientation to the Other*, the excellence of the Judaeo-Christian legacy, underlies structuralist ontology.

Levinas offers us the following thought:

‘For a Frenchman there does exist the possibility of learning Chinese and passing from one culture into another, without the intermediary of an *Esperanto* that would falsify both tongues which it mediated. Yet what has not been taken into consideration in this case is that an *orientation* is needed to have the Frenchman take up learning Chinese instead of declaring it to be barbarian (that is, bereft of the real virtues of language) and to prefer speech to war.’ [MS 46]

These two dense sentences perhaps need a little unpacking. Levinas offers his own gloss but we will supplement these with additional connections. Levinas makes three points explicit:

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<sup>24</sup> In his essay on Lévy-Bruhl, Levinas notes that the privilege of occidental reason comes not from the cogito (a transcendental or universal argument) but from the independence that its thought has achieved *from history* and that this reason rests on a mentality that is itself the object of a *choice*. ‘Lévy-Bruhl et la philosophie contemporaine’, p. 61. Another reference to Lévy-Bruhl precedes the following sentence: ‘Philosophy *willed* souls that are separate and in a sense impenetrable.’ Levinas ‘Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity’, p. 48.

<sup>25</sup> For Husserl’s similar gesture against Dilthey and *Lebensphilosophie* please see Appendix A.



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1. The recognition of the richness of cultures and the suggestion that they are equivalent, *depends upon an orientation to the other*; a *sense* of the status of humanity<sup>26</sup>. This is the ‘generosity’ of Western thought.
2. War does not only spring from a logic directed towards totality and domination. War also springs from the friction of contiguity with other civilisations. Difference cannot be valorised *per se*, if war is to be avoided. Indeed, as Visker notes, the *similarity* of cultures can enhance mutual irritation and lead to competition for resources that they both value<sup>27</sup>.
3. Peace does not just require the recognition of difference, but the orientation to the Other: the *sens unique* which can ground peace. This *sens unique* is uncovered by phenomenological analysis of the encounter with exteriority. Levinas radically distinguishes this orientation as that which gives sense to the plurality of cultural meanings. ‘The presence of the Other dispels the anarchic sorcery of the facts...’ [TI 99]<sup>28</sup>. Phenomenological analysis is extended beyond Heideggerian disclosure of being, by showing that the relation with ‘the existent that expresses himself’ pre-exists the disclosure of being. Alterity for Levinas is not the mark of empirical difference, but the mark of height experienced in the presentation of the face. The element ignored by anthropology is *the activity of the speaker who arranges and assembles to allow being to shine forth* [MS 38, my emphasis]. To envisage language as the revelation (qua production as opposed to disclosure) of the Other produces the birth of morality.

Let us add some supplementary points:

1. Firstly, there is also a more pointed dimension to the question raised but not answered regarding China. As Bernasconi notes, Levinas seems unaware that the Chinese also learn to speak French<sup>29</sup>. Moreover, is there the implicit suggestion that Chinese is a barbarian language? Levinas glosses a barbarian

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<sup>26</sup> Compare the claim to *factualness* discerned by Husserl above.

<sup>27</sup> *Truth and Singularity* p. 218 fn. 19.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Crisis* 9: ‘All these “metaphysical” questions, taken broadly ... surpass the world understood as the universe of mere facts.’

<sup>29</sup> Bernasconi ‘Who is the Other? Who is the neighbor?’ p. 22.



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language as one which 'is bereft of the real virtues of language'. That is, a language which does not allow the transcendental horizon (and limit on Levinas's reading) of being to appear in speech – it would remain a language of everyday commerce and gossip.

2. This leads to the second point. The veiled suggestion to the anthropologist is the following: we have seen that your interest in these other civilisations and cultures depends on an orientation towards the other. But does the culture you examine *itself* reveal or valorise this orientation? The hierarchialisation of cultures will be produced in this way. Only those cultures that do enable external orientation will have something of value.
3. We can pursue this latter point a little further. We have already offered some of Levinas's remarks on China. With reference to the universal interpenetrability of cultures, Levinas suggests that Asia brings us *nothing* of importance that we cannot translate into our own languages, nothing that is not dance. That is, it brings us nothing that we did not already contain – it and its inhabitants cannot teach us. However, reciprocity is not guaranteed: what we bring may exceed Chinese capacities.

What is this basis for this Eurocentrism? We have already noted that there can be no appeal to any epistemological validity-ground. 'Meaning and Sense' represents Levinas's philosophical project as a combination of phenomenology and Platonism: there are a variety of ways in which truth has been revealed in the world: this might not represent a betrayal of truth, but the 'inexhaustible richness of its event' [MS 42]. A contemporary Platonism, which seeks access to the intelligible, would aim to uncover the 'transcendental function of the whole concrete density' from the various forms of 'corporeal, technical, social and political existence'. In this way, phenomenology produces the possibility of a new understanding of the separation of the intelligible, ideal world from the various cultural manifestations in which it is *mixed*. And, on the basis of this uncovering, phenomenology can take up the whole density of history while 'remaking the world in the function of the intemporal order of Ideas' [MS 42-]



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43]<sup>30</sup>. That is, the specific ideas relating to infinity, the Other and history, which Levinas takes to be peculiar to our historical contingency. Prophetic time, creation and eschatology oppose submission to *fate*<sup>31</sup>.

### Neo-Kantian Ideas and Monotheism

As for Kant, the idea is a ‘concept of reason that can be met nowhere in experience’<sup>32</sup>. As ideas the ‘remoteness, alterity, and exteriority’ of the Other are not deducible from the being of beings nor from its revelation. They emanate from the history of a particular culture. How then to understand an Idea of reason that would be culturally specific in this way?

Durkheim is relevant here. For the latter, ‘social facts’ [*les faits sociaux*] represent the elementary, foundational ideal structures that determine religions, cultures and societies *through which experience is synthesised*. In Levinas’s early essay on Hitlerism, this dimension is explicit: ideas ‘prefigure or predetermine the meaning of the adventure the soul will face in the world’<sup>33</sup>. In relation to paganism, ideas are taken to originate in ‘concrete being’.

In its Marburg variant, Kant’s original privileging of the given of experience (owing to its necessary structuring by the transcendental categories), as that which distinguishes knowledge from thinking is displaced. Diverse ideas, with religious formations as paradigmatic, organise the categories and forms of intuition – their constitutive function grows as the claims to universality

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<sup>30</sup> Cf Husserl: ‘For this renewed “Platonism” this means not only that man should be changed ethically [but that] the whole human surrounding world, the political and social existence of mankind, must be fashioned anew through free reason, through the insights of a universal philosophy.’ [*Crisis* 8]

<sup>31</sup> ‘What distinguishes the liberal experience of an individual’s rational choice between different outcomes ... from the ‘experience of the possibilities open to him as a series of restless powers that seethe within him and already push him down a determined path’ is not logic, but a commitment to the elementary form of freedom over that of fate.’ [*L&P* 35]

<sup>32</sup> Immanuel Kant ‘The Jäsche Logic’ [1800] translated by J. Michael Young in *Lectures on Logic* edited by J. Michael Young (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 517-640; p. 590.

<sup>33</sup> Levinas ‘Reflections on Hitlerism’, p. 64.



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regarding the forms of intuition and the categories are diminished<sup>34</sup>. In Durkheim's sociology, any distinction between these notions has been collapsed so that 'social facts' are the organising nodal points of experience. Levinas's reading of Lévy-Bruhl places him firmly in this group of thinkers (and in so doing puts his phenomenology in trouble).

*'Lévy-Bruhl met précisément en question la prétendue nécessité de ces catégories pour la possibilité de l'expérience. Il décrit une expérience qui se joue de la causalité, de la substance, de la réciprocité – comme de l'espace et comme du temps –, de ces conditions de «tout objet possible».'*<sup>35</sup>

'Lévy-Bruhl puts in question the pretence to necessity of the categories for the possibility of experience. He describes an experience which mocks causality, substance, the reciprocity – such as space and time – of these conditions for 'all possible objects'.' [my translation]

The categories of Aristotle and Kant do not apply to those 'participating'<sup>36</sup>. They are descriptions of cultural formations that have accreted above that primitive form. Hence, there is no shared transcendental structure and the given is held to be radically contingent.

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<sup>34</sup> A thorough discussion of Cohen's relation to Herbart and *Völkerpsychologie* – which held both that only communal structures constitute real phenomenon and that these structures, as *Ideen der Gestaltung*, are productive (*schöpferisch*) and effective (*wirksam*) in the active lives of individuals, institutions and cultural artefacts – can be found in the PhD dissertation of Lydia Patton. Lydia Patton *Hermann Cohen's History and Philosophy of Science* PhD McGill University, 2004, pp. 64 ff. <http://www.uchicago.edu/~patton/dissertation.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> 'Lévy-Bruhl et la philosophie contemporaine' p. 51.

<sup>36</sup> There is an important Neo-Kantian confluence to be reconstructed between Walter Benjamin and Levinas. For example, compare the following to the critique of 'empty, homogeneous time' in the former's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History': '*Le temps-forme pure est inconnu des primitifs, les instants ont chacun un potentiel différent, contrairement à la homogénéité du temps-forme.*' Ibid. p. 59-60. 'The pure form of time is unknown to primitives, the instants each have their own different potential, in contrast to the homogeneity of the form of time [in Kant].' Walter Benjamin 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations* (London, FontanaPress, 1973), pp. 245-55.



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For Hermann Cohen, who held there to be no ‘transcendental aesthetic’<sup>37</sup> (space and time being forms of pure mathematical thought), science would then only be critically grounded in the Idea (his political socialism saw the necessity for transformation of being in accordance with a different set of Ideas)<sup>38</sup>. But the idea can only begin as a *hypothesis* – it cannot draw its validity from the potential arbitrariness of the given. Its justification is only found through the accomplishment of the task it orients<sup>39</sup>: the world is reconceived as an *occasion* for the production of the ideal object – the task for philosophy is the imposition of reason on being: the remaking of the world. As Caygill notes in his commentary on Levinas’s ‘Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism’, autonomy would only be achieved in the political task which ‘... consists in the sovereign imposition of the ideal laws of spirit upon the historical and natural world ...’ [*L&P* 35]<sup>40</sup>.

Having sketched the general neo-Kantian themes, it is now time to look at Franz Rosenzweig, himself deeply influenced by Cohen. In the Preface to *Totality and*

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<sup>37</sup> ‘The principle of synthesis in Kant presupposes something given and is therefore not strictly in keeping with the transcendental analysis of ‘pure’ thought: ‘thought starts off in something outside itself. This is where the weakness in Kant’s grounding lies. Here lies the reason for the early defections in his school . . . Returning to the historical ground of critique, we will not allow a theory of sensibility to precede logic.’ Cited in Andrea Poma *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen* translated by John Denton (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 81. It is important to note that Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*, often understood simply in opposition to psychologism, is equally directed against the *logicism* of certain neo-Kantianisms, such as Rudolf Lotze where validity is instantiated only at the level of logical consistency (Cohen himself argued that science was only the systematic presentation of knowledge in textbooks). Husserl’s concern with intentionality attempts to break with this idealism by insisting on the explication of knowledge starting from meaning-structures.

<sup>38</sup> For Cohen the primary ethical category is the ‘fellowman’ [*Mitmensch*]. The Heideggerian echo of this latter figure is softened by its contrast with the ‘next man’, my merely numerical community member [*Nebenmensch*]. The political project is judged by the transformation of *Nebenmensch* into fellowmen. My reading of Cohen is indebted to Nickolas Lambrianou. Nickolas Lambrianou *Origin and Becoming: Anticipation, Orientation and Creatureliness in the work of Walter Benjamin, Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig and Hugo von Hofmannsthal* PhD Birkbeck College, University of London, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> The connections between neo-Kantianism and American pragmatism (and pragmaticism) are evident in the work of Hans Vaihinger, the latter explicitly treating the idea as an ‘as if’ (*als ob*). Vaihinger *The Philosophy of ‘As If’: a system of the theoretical, practical, and religious fictions of mankind* [1911] translated by C.K. Ogden [1924] (London, Routledge, 2000). Gillian Rose notes that the reception of Lotze in the USA in the 1870’s was ‘as great as Hegel and Kant’. Gillian Rose *Hegel contra Sociology* p. 5-6.

<sup>40</sup> The triumph of idealism is the ‘...tearing up the bedrock of existence’ where the ‘blind world of common sense’ is replaced by ‘the world rebuilt by idealist philosophy, one that is steeped in reason and subject to reason.’ As Levinas asks in ‘Reflections...’: ‘What remains of materialism when matter has been completely pervaded by reason?’ [op. cit. p. 66].



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*Infinity*, Levinas indicates his debt to Rosenzweig's radical, yet skewed, appropriation of Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. 'We were impressed by the opposition to the idea of totality in Franz Rosenzweig's *Stern der Erlösung* [*Star of Redemption*], a work too often present in this book to be cited.' [TI 28]. Recalling the reference in our Introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, I suggest that this failure to cite Rosenzweig, which he read in 1935, is mainly responsible for the 'quasi-phenomenological' English-language reception of Levinas<sup>41</sup>. Most importantly, Rosenzweig introduces the category of the 'face' [*das Gesicht*]<sup>42</sup>.

If one reads the first part of the *Star of Redemption*, one is swiftly struck by the presentation which uses repeated oppositions between the concepts inherent to Judaism and Christianity and those of the Chinese and Indian religions. The Judeo-Christian legacy is valorised by virtue of a conceptual superiority: the ideas of God, world and human are defined by the specific interrelation of transcendence and immanence and the concept of historical time<sup>43</sup>.

For Rosenzweig, the experience of the 'face' of the other in language is not open to those dwelling within Asian cultures, for they have an inadequate conception of the relation between immanence and transcendence. In the Hindu conception of a world of veils, which reduces human reality to appearance, he sees too much separation between transcendence and immanence – nothing of value can appear *in this world*. In the Buddhist and Confucian conception of a world of excessive

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<sup>41</sup> For Mosès, *Totality and Infinity*'s preface reprises the Introduction of *Star of Redemption* (op. cit. p. 21 ff.) – it extends those analyses, but in offering a phenomenology of war it 'radicalises' Rosenzweig insofar as it positions the latter's personalism as a 'naïve egoism'. Tellingly, Levinas 'agrees with Hegel' – the individual cannot fight against the totality of the real without creating new institutions.

<sup>42</sup> Derrida also notes that the distinction between the eyes of the other and that the other looks at me is made by Scheler [VM 122].

<sup>43</sup> 'The mythical was dominant in the religions of the Near East and Europe until their eclipse, and as a stage of development everywhere. As such it represents not a lower, but the higher form as against the "spiritual religions" of the Orient. It is not by coincidence that revelation ... took road to the West, not to the East. The living "gods of Greece" were worthier opponents of the living God than the phantoms of the Asiatic Orient. The deities of China as of India are massive structures made from the monoliths of primeval time which still protrude into our own times in the cults of "primitives."' [op. cit. p. 35] And a later aside: 'at least the gods of myth *lived*.' [ibid. p.38].



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variation, he finds only a throng of spirits multiplying<sup>44</sup> – an excess of mixing between immanence and transcendence. If the transcendent is too fully merged into the world then there is only a negotiation through its infinity – nothing of value can be extracted from this proliferation. In short, Buddhist and Hindu metaphysics are presented as polar opposites, but from which there is the same result – *the human individual is not the root of value*. The weakness of India and China for Rosenzweig is that they are unable to live beyond the immediate present, since history for those cultures is simply the passage of various contingent arrangements – the future cannot be the site of meaning, by which to guide the transformation of the present. The voice of the other cannot be heard – they flee the ‘face of the living God for abstraction’<sup>45</sup>. The history of the Judaeo-Christian West, in contrast, has been formed by a more complicated interaction of immanence and transcendence – according to the Bible, humanity was made in the image of God – it finds itself suspended between the animal and the divine. This, combined with the concept of prophetic time, produces a wholly different culture, a wholly different past. Prophetic time signals the specific Biblical temporality whereby revelation is not given once and for all as edict to follow, but revealed as prophecy giving signs that must be discerned in the future to come<sup>46</sup>. Caygill correctly connects monotheism to a freedom ‘oriented to the present prophetically saturated with presentiments of the future rather than memories of the past’ [L&P 33]. Rosenzweig specifically rejects Islam as *pagan*

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<sup>44</sup> This notion of China overflowing with spirits [ibid. p. 35] may underlie Levinas’s reference to the ‘density of China’s past’.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p. 36. Rosenzweig believes that Asia produces a primitive atheism, primitive idealism and primitive phenomenalism. This summary of Rosenzweig is synthesised from three brief sections: ‘Asia: The Unmythical God’ [ibid. pp. 35-38]; ‘Asia: The Non-Plastic World’ [ibid. pp. 57-60]; ‘Asia: Non-Tragic Man’ [ibid. pp. 73-76].

<sup>46</sup> We should note that the criticism of Oriental philosophy in Hegel differs from that offered by Rosenzweig. For Hegel, Indian philosophy lacks objectivity since the end for the soul is to withdraw within itself: subjectivity, such as it is, remains in bad abstraction at the level of an empty vanity. Analogously, Chinese thought is taken to value the undetermined nothing, or emptiness as the highest. In both cases, the external has not been comprehended in accordance with the idea and is therefore not comprehended in objectivity. We have seen that Levinas admires Rosenzweig for his opposition to Hegelian objectivity and totality. While the criticism does concern subjectivity, in Rosenzweig it concerns the status of the individual *not* the status of knowledge. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy - Volume I* translated by E.S. Haldane & Frances H. Simon (New York, The Humanities Press, 1974).



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because of its once-and-for-all-time revelation in Mohammed; Judaism would also share this structure were it to rest with the Pentateuch<sup>47</sup>.

Levinas's own essay on Rosenzweig<sup>48</sup>, where he allies himself with the 'new thinking'<sup>49</sup>, where presented content is held to be inseparable from the one who presents it, explicitly addresses these themes<sup>50</sup>. Europe, as synthesis of Christianity and Judaism, is taken to be the key to the salvation of the world; together they resist 'German barbarity'<sup>51</sup>. The new concept of religion he finds therein is dramatically opposed to 'unctuous, consoling religion'<sup>52</sup>; it prepares the Kingdom of God by penetrating the world with love so that the I learns to say "Thou" to "he". What Levinas sees as most valuable in Rosenzweig is the nerve to take the 'anticipation of eternity' as a 'valid *point of departure* for philosophical concepts'; in this way, it escapes dogmatics and quietism. I stress again the notion of *anticipation* and connect it back to the ideas – 'truth is only verified through *life*'.

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<sup>47</sup> Indeed Islam is described as a *pagan plagiarisation* of Judaism, with Mohammed 'taking over' revelation but neglecting the proper presuppositions of prophecy [op. cit. p. 116] so that the Koran is only a 'magical miracle' and Allah (who is not God) only an 'oriental despot' [ibid. p.118]. Importantly for our later consideration of the particular excellence imputed to Judaism, Rosenzweig criticizes two Islamic doctrines. Since, in Islam, it is held Allah must reveal himself, the first is the 'fiction' that 'thinks all nations have received their prophets' [ibid. p. 165]. The second that each era has its own Imam to lead it righteously. Rosenzweig writes against this idea of *eras* opposed to any notion of 'growth' – 'the idea of the future is here poisoned in root. For the future is first and foremost a matter of anticipating, that is, the end must be expected at every moment. Only thus does the future become the time of eternity.' [ibid. p. 226] Again, here we could dig further, we could examine Levinas's comments on the Palestinians in light of Rosenzweig's sweeping rejections of Islam. Caygill has examined Levinas's strange re-citation of 'Poetry and the Impossible' in the foreword to *Beyond the Verse*, where he elides a sentence which had described Arabs as 'deaf to the call of conscience' and reduced their claim to Palestine as a 'nostalgia for birthplace and minaret'. We are now in a position to see these comments as produced from a systematic philosophical position: nostalgia for homeland and deafness to the individual being the hallmarks of paganism, nationalism and barbarism preventing the possibility of responding to the face of the other as idea of the infinite. Levinas *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures* translated Gary D. Mole (London, Athlone, 1982). Discussed by Caygill at L&P 186 ff..

<sup>48</sup> 'Franz Rosenzweig' [1965] in *Outside the Subject* (London, The Athlone Press, 1993), pp. 49-66.

<sup>49</sup> In Rosenzweig's technical distinction, 'new thinking' is opposed to 'apologetic thinking' which produces reasoning in response to events rather than commencing dialogue anew.

<sup>50</sup> See L&P 98-9. Caygill also situates Levinas within the 'horizon' of the 'new thinking', though notes that he does not utilise the methodology of speculative grammatical analysis. But, perhaps there is a remnant of this in the privileged insight granted by Levinas to certain formations in the French language.

<sup>51</sup> op. cit. p. 52.

<sup>52</sup> op. cit. p. 55.



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The combination of Judaism and Christianity takes a startling form: 'Judaism is alive and true to the degree that it stays close to God, while Christianity is alive and true as a mission to the extent that it marches into the world and penetrates it.'<sup>53</sup> Christianity is understood as a world spirit that must be corrected by two 'Jewish features':

1. Love must be understood as *commandment*; an imperative that exceeds the worldly;
2. The human being is the mediator of redemption – the site of production of the infinite.

This renders explicit what has already been noted by Visker: 'It is because the monotheists have enabled the world to hear the word of the one and only God that Greek universalism can work in humanity and slowly unify that humanity.'<sup>54</sup> The Europeanization of the world is the condition of possibility for the ethical understanding of love and the fully human possibilities of the ethical Other.

In 'Place and Utopia'<sup>55</sup>, Levinas offers a straightforward differentiation of the three main forms:

1. The pagan: it is marked by the satisfaction of the self before the other. It is egoist and unconcerned if it usurps another's place in the sun.
2. The Christian: it is marked by the utopian rejection of this world in favour of kingdom of god.
3. The Jewish: concerns itself with 'ethical action' which 'does not flee from the conditions from which one's work draws its meaning'<sup>56</sup>.

The latter two produce the elementary principles of Europe [*L&P* 45]. Although we are all human beings, for Levinas, there *are* differences to lose sleep over.

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<sup>53</sup> *op. cit.* p. 62.

<sup>54</sup> Visker *Truth and Singularity* p. 129.

<sup>55</sup> 'Place and Utopia' translated by Seán Hand [1950] in *Difficult Freedom – Essays on Judaism* (London, Athlone, 1990), pp. 99-102.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p. 100.



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The prevention of war, the possibility of peace, requires a kind of missionary proselytization, a conversion to the Other. The problem of the Other is not simply the respect and recognition of difference but the overcoming of nihilism by justifying subjective existence *per se*<sup>57</sup>. This does not require a ‘lateral’ differentiation with reciprocal possibilities for inter-communal translation; it requires the *manifestation of western excellence* such that the other cultures of the world *Europeanize* (pace Husserl). Europe is the name for a spiritual plenitude<sup>58</sup>. Europe is marked by its *idealism*, its desire to surpass being: ‘Every civilization that accepts being – with the tragic despair it contains and the crimes it justifies – merits the name barbarian.’<sup>59</sup> In this sense, responsibility ‘gives life a meaning and organisation that it lacks by itself’<sup>60</sup>.

### Atheism and De-divinisation

We will turn to the status of this belief in Europe’s excellence, but first let me rehearse and reject the mistaken view that these comments are merely a prejudice resulting from Levinas’s religious belief. It is a red herring to attribute them to the monotheist’s sense of superiority. This tactic is often used to bracket off Levinas’s “religious beliefs” in order to recuperate or protect the “philosophical” core. Although Levinas concludes ‘Meaning and Sense’ by referring to the Judaeo-Christian idea of humanity as made in the image of God, this represents a *reappropriation* of Jewish thought [MS 64]. Importantly it is a reappropriation made possible by both a secularisation which refuses to believe in the creationist myth, and one which depends on the changed historical conditions mentioned earlier (*infra* page 87). Levinas insists on the need to translate the Hebrew into Greek – the sacred writings bring concepts which could not be produced from phenomenology itself<sup>61</sup>. The task for Levinas is not to repeat Greek through

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<sup>57</sup> See Caygill’s discussion of nihilism in the context of the Cold War and nuclear weapons [L&P 70-1].

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Visker *Truth and Singularity* p. 157 ff..

<sup>59</sup> Levinas ‘On Escape’ p. 73.

<sup>60</sup> *Truth and Singularity* p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> In this regard, we should note that, according to Robert Gibbs, the original Hebrew word translated by ‘ethics’ means ‘sanctification’. Robert Gibbs *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992)



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German *pace* Heidegger, but to teach Greek philosophy the Hebrew concepts and hence to mutate it.

On the other hand, this mutation transforms the religious dimension of these concepts. To use a different register: Levinas argues that certain concepts taken from Judaism now achieve a new legibility in the modern world. Crucially, reason is taken to have entered world history with the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century<sup>62</sup>. The modern world is both de-sacralised and disenchanted, and this secularisation is a necessary condition for the ethical response to the other. Levinas has no belief in a personal God, posits no afterlife, and constantly translates the content of the Biblical text and commentaries into philosophical language<sup>63</sup>. This is what Levinas means in *Totality and Infinity* when he refers to the ‘atheism’ of separation that motivates *both* his resistance to the paganism of place found in Heidegger’s fateful enunciation of Germany’s destiny *and* his opposition to messianic Zionism. It is only from this atheism that the specific content of Judaic thought achieves a transformed pertinence.

‘To relate to the absolute as an atheist is to welcome the absolute purified of the violence of the sacred. In the dimension of height in which his sanctity, that is, his separation, is presented, the infinite does not burn the eyes that are lifted unto him. ... He is not numinous: the I who approaches him is neither annihilated on the contact nor transported outside of itself, but remains separated and keeps its as-for-me. Only an atheist being can relate himself to the other and already *absolve himself* from this relation. ... The metaphysical relation, the idea of infinity, connects with the noumenon which is not a numen. This noumenon is to be distinguished from the concept of God possessed by the believers of positive religions ill disengaged from the bonds of participation, who accept being immersed in a myth unbeknown to themselves. The idea of infinity, the metaphysical relation, is the dawn of humanity without myths. *But faith purged of myths, the monotheist faith, itself implies metaphysical atheism.*’ [TI 77] [my emphasis]

Here, the believers in ‘positive religions’ are equated to ‘pagans’ insofar as they are ‘immersed in myth’. Judaism must be purged of myths such that the notion

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<sup>62</sup> In essays, such as ‘Messianic Texts’, he argues that Jews are no longer excluded from political or state history and as a result messianic thinking is *no longer* appropriate. ‘Messianic Texts’ in *Difficult Freedom – Essays on Judaism* translated by Seán Hand (London, Athlone, 1990), pp. 59-96.

<sup>63</sup> As noted by Caygill, part of Levinas’s valorisation of technology is that it shows us that the gods are of this world [L&P 154].



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of ‘God’ undergoes a deflation. It is not distinguishable from the ethical production of transcendence.

‘The atheism of the metaphysician means, positively, that our relation [*rapport*] with the Metaphysical is an ethical behavior [*comportement éthique*] and not theology, not a thematization, be it a knowledge by analogy, of the attributes of God. God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men. ... A God invisible means not only a God unimaginable, but a God accessible in justice. Ethics is the spiritual optics. ... The work of justice – the uprightness of the face to face – is necessary in order that the breach that leads to God be produced [*pour que se produise la trouée qui mène à Dieu*] – and “vision” here coincides with this work of justice. ... Hence metaphysics is enacted [*se joue*] where the social relation is enacted – in our relations [*rapports*] with men. There can be no “knowledge” [*connaissance*] of God separated from the relationship with men. The Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God. He does not play [*ne joue point*] the role of mediator. The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed. It is our relations to men, which describe a field of research hardly glimpsed at ... that give to theological concepts the *sole signification* they bear [*qu’ils comportent*]. The establishing of this primacy of the ethical, that is, of the relationship of man to man – signification, teaching, and justice – a primacy of an irreducible structure upon which all the other structures rest ... is one of the objectives of the present work. ... Everything that cannot be reduced to an interhuman relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion.’ [*TI* 78-79, *Tel* 76-8] [translation modified]

The reduction of these religious concepts to social relations (with God a *correlative of the work of justice*) is the consequence of their translation into neo-Kantian ideas. Although ‘God’ is required in Levinas’s system, God is reduced to a synonym for the production of transcendence in ethico-political action. Contra Visker<sup>64</sup>, Caygill [*L&P* 124] and Derrida<sup>65</sup>, I here insist that there is no God *qua* being who could ‘arrange for justice’; there is no holy intervention in the finite – God is *only* the production of justice, or ‘ethical action’ is the ‘*accession to divinity*’<sup>66</sup>. This is underlined in Levinas’s resistance to fate *even in the form of divine grace or predestination*.

‘The ethical relation is defined, in contrast with every relation with the sacred, by excluding every signification it would take on *unbeknown* to him who

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<sup>64</sup> *Truth and Singularity* p. 298.

<sup>65</sup> *VM* 133: ‘... God alone keeps Levinas’s world from being a world of the pure and worst violence, a world of immorality itself.’

<sup>66</sup> ‘Place and Utopia’, p. 101.



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maintains that relation. When I maintain an ethical relation I refuse to recognize the role I would play in a drama of which I would not be the author or whose outcome another would know before me; I refuse to figure in a drama of salvation or of damnation that would be enacted [*se jouerait*] in spite of me and that would make a game of me.’ [TI 79]

Concomitantly, *monotheism* too reduces to fraternity. In the section of *Totality and Infinity*, entitled ‘The Other and the others’ [*Autrui et les autres*], Levinas argues that the epiphany of the face *opens* humanity – there is no access or experience of humanity before the encounter with the face: the experience of the third party in the eyes of the other, the experience of something beyond being, produces a whole new experience of humanity. This human fraternity is invoked over and above biological species being, but as it does so it exceeds phenomenological evidence [TI 213-214]. The face comes from beyond the world of meaning and *commits* me to fraternity in referring to the ‘third party’ (*le tiers*), ‘whom in the midst of his destitution the Other [*l’Autrui*] already serves’. As he writes in *Otherwise than Being*: my obsession with the other is only broken by an obsession with ‘all the others’ – it is this second move which produces the demand for justice [OtB 158]. But is important to note, that the encounter with *Autrui* is the prior condition of possibility for the valorisation of *les Autres*, such that the latter are understood as a pluralism, not as members of a genus<sup>67</sup>.

The new orientation for a world in which this pluralism would not be a delusion takes form as an anticipation, a projection into the future:

‘Society must be [*il faut que*] a fraternal community to be commensurate with the straightforwardness, the primary proximity, in which the face presents itself to my welcome. Monotheism signifies this human kinship, this idea of a human race that refers back to the approach of the Other in the face, in a dimension of height, in responsibility for oneself and for the Other.’ [TI 214]

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<sup>67</sup> ‘This moral experience, so commonplace, indicates a metaphysical asymmetry: the radical impossibility of seeing oneself from the outside and of speaking in the same sense of oneself and of the others, consequently the impossibility of totalization – and, on the plane of social experience, the impossibility of *forgetting* the intersubjective experience that leads to the social experience and endows it with meaning ....’ [TI 53].



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Let us stress, monotheism is superior to biological genus, if, and only if, the notion of all the others in fraternity necessarily ‘refers back to the approach of the Other’. This kinship would not be tied to being, but engaged in an attempt to overwrite it. ‘Transcendence or goodness is produced [*se produit*] as pluralism.’ [TI 305]

Levinas’s ‘monotheism’, his ‘religion’, might be distilled of all positive theological content, but it persists in valorising the historical tradition of Judaism as a body of ideas, practices and thought. Here is located an important connection to Neo-Kantian *Lehre* – variously translated as ‘doctrine’, ‘teaching’, ‘study’ etc, but signifying a body of ‘knowledge’ and experience [*Erfahrung*] handed down. This unique source is reconfigured for its pertinence to current and future conditions<sup>68</sup>. Exemplary here is Cohen’s *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*<sup>69</sup>, while the pervasive themes can be seen in Walter Benjamin’s earliest writings<sup>70</sup>.

The claim fluctuates in Levinas between an excellence of Europe, an excellence of monotheism and an excellence of Judaism<sup>71</sup>, but the content of that

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<sup>68</sup> Rosenzweig contrasts the ‘historical’ bent of Islam in its return to the original meaning of Mohammed’s revelation, this is contrasted with the Judaic tradition of logical deduction: ‘It follows that Islamic law everywhere strives to go back to direct pronouncements of the founder, thus veritably developing a strictly historical method, while both Talmudic and canon law seek to make their points by means, not of historical fact-finding, but of logical deduction. For deduction is subconsciously determined by the goal of the deduction, that is to say the present, and therefore it gives the contemporary power over the past.’ *Star of Redemption* pp. 216-17. Note the echo of Cohen’s *hypothesis* in this account of deduction.

<sup>69</sup> *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* [1919] translated by Simon Kaplan (New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing co., 1972). Here, religion is a ‘new extension’ of the concept of man, as individual, and humanity, which mark the limit of traditional ethical understanding [ibid. pp. 19-32]. It teaches ethics to say ‘Thou’ to ‘he’. But religion is *also* a moral teaching for the ‘Jewish consciousness’, or it is not religion [ibid. p. 33].

<sup>70</sup> ‘However, the original and primal concept of knowledge does not reach a concrete totality of experience in this context, any more than it reaches a concept of existence. But there is a unity of experience that can by no means be understood as a sum of experiences, too which the concept of knowledge as teaching [*Lehre*] is *immediately* related in its continuous development. The object and content of this teaching [*Lehre*], this concrete totality of experience, is religion, which, however, is presented to philosophy in the first instance only as teaching [*Lehre*].’ Benjamin ‘On the Program of the Coming Philosophy’ in [1918] translated by Mark Ritter in *Selected Writings: volume 1 – 1913-1926* edited M. Bullock & M. Jennings (London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 100-110; p. 109.

<sup>71</sup> For Rosenzweig, the Jewish people attest to a collective meta-historical experience. *Mosès Au-delà de la guerre* p. 13.



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*exemplarity* remains the same: the idea of humanity<sup>72</sup>. Mosès reads Levinas's conception of the infinite as the philosophical re-presentation of the unrepresentable God who can only appear as a burning bush, and suggests the Judaic religion as the 'original coming-together of circumstances' (*concoure originaire de circonstances*) that allows the infinite to form *anachronistically* as an idea (*vient à l'idée*)<sup>73</sup>.

But the question incumbent upon a philosophy that does not wish to remain a *Weltanschauung* (in the sense of 'Jewish Philosophy'<sup>74</sup>) is the following: what justifies this claim to excellence? As Adorno has noted, is there not a danger of 'collective narcissism' here in this thought of religious collectivities?<sup>75</sup> Derrida has pursued this question with respect to Cohen's attempt to articulate the particular importance of the German-Jewish psyche for the state of Judaism as a whole in *Deutschtum und Judentum* (1915). His three guiding questions are:

1. What happens when a people or a group presents itself as exemplary?
2. How did the Germans and the Jews declare this exemplarity?<sup>76</sup>
3. How did Cohen intend to prove this?<sup>77</sup>

Derrida notes the importance of Fichte for Cohen, in that the former 'discovered that the social Self is a national Self'<sup>78</sup> and hence allowed thought to go beyond Kant through the formation of a *Geisteswissenschaft* – a human science in the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p. 46.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p. 89. Perhaps it is worth addressing the manner in which this idea is effaced in the very title of the English translation of *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Paris, 1982) as *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. *Of God Who Comes to Mind* translated by Bettina Bergo (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>74</sup> In response to Lyotard's questioning, Levinas complains that he would be reduced to a 'Jewish thinker'. *Autrement que Savoir: Emmanuel Levinas avec des études de Guy Petitdemange & Jacques Rolland* (Paris, Osiris, 1987), p. 79. It is perhaps the weakness of Mosès's reading of Levinas that this fundamental problem is not broached.

<sup>75</sup> 'On the Question: "What is German?"' translated by Henry W. Pickford in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* [1963/1969] (New York, Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 205-214, p. 205.

<sup>76</sup> 'Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German' pp. 138-39.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p. 153.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. pp. 174-75.



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sense that studies the particularities of different *Volkgeister*<sup>79</sup>. Derrida strikes up against this ‘fable’, this ‘delirium’ which prompts him to ask whether Cohen could have taken this account at all seriously?<sup>80</sup>

### Illusion or Ideology?

The insistence on the determination of the ideas by the socio-cultural forces us to ask: if the ideas are so determined what guarantees the transcendence of the transcendence? What marks it out as escaping the reduction of thought to a mythology – how does the atheist metaphysical relation justify that very insistence on the escape from ontology?

At an epistemological level, the surprising answer to the question posed is – *nothing*. Transcendence is produced, *occurs*, in being, – its justification lies in this task of production. That is, the idea of the Other encountered in height and the idea of metaphysical plurality are technically *illusions* (even though not transcendental) – reason would like to encompass them but cannot. Insofar as unaided desire attempts to go beyond Sartre’s block, it is illusory. *Autrui*, the metaphysical interpretation of this particular encounter in teaching as the encounter with the *infinite*, is an illusion, but it marks a *positive, productive* illusion that allows the existent to break from its egoism:

‘Even [the cause of the metaphysical relation to the other], older than itself, is still to come [*à venir*]. The cause of being is thought or known by its effect *as if* [*comme si*] it were posterior to its effect. We speak lightly of the possibility of this “as if” [*comme si*], which is taken to indicate an illusion. But this illusion is not unjustified [*n’est pas gratuite*]; it constitutes a positive event.’  
[TI 54] [translation altered]

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<sup>79</sup> That is, the transcendental is no longer understood as universal – different transcendental structures for different societies, cultures and peoples. See *infra* p. 96 fn. 34. See also, the introduction to *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, where the historical approach to the various religious formations is contrasted with the concept of religion produced by the ‘religion of reason’ [op. cit. pp. 1-34].

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. pp. 149-50. For another investigation of the particular claims of Judaism see his discussion of Scholem’s 1926 letter to Rosenzweig where the correspondent assumes that Hebrew is a sacred language. ‘The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano’ translated by Gil Anidjar in *Acts of Religion* edited by Gil Anidjar (New York & London. Routledge, 2002). pp.191-227.



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I do not think it unwarranted to insist on a connection to Vaihinger here<sup>81</sup>. Levinas insists that: ‘The power of illusion is not a simple aberration of thought, but a movement in being itself. It has an ontological import.’ [TI 240] The face of the other is not given like a value – it breaks with the immanent destiny of the self-contained ego. It is for this reason that Levinas makes reference to the divine enthusiasm discussed in the *Phaedrus*: ‘Possession by a god, enthusiasm, is not the irrational, but the end of the solitary ... or inward thought, the beginning of a true experience of the *new* and of the noumenon – already Desire.’ [TI 50]<sup>82</sup>.

Analogous to Cohen’s socialism, where the political task of philosophy is to critically ground social being in the Idea (the reality of which must be asserted while it is developed as a hypothesis, an *as if*), analogous to this, the face cannot ground politics, nor can it be encompassed and dealt with by phenomenology (it is precisely that which is refractory to phenomenology); instead the meaningfulness of the face can only be speculatively justified on the basis on the transformation of being effected in its name – what world is produced as offered to the Other?<sup>83</sup> What this means, of course, is that the truth content of Levinas’s philosophical system is its politics. Once we understand the ideas of *Autrui* as somehow an illusion, a “vision”, we can understand the specific quality of Levinas’s notion of instantiated justice as that which both *preserves* the possibility of the encounter in teaching and *regulates* the Desire thereby

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<sup>81</sup> See note 30. In a note to his 1974 essay, ‘From Consciousness to Wakefulness’, Levinas distinguishes his ‘*comme si*’ from the ‘uncertainty or simple probability of the philosophies of the “*als ob*”’, since they depend on ‘truth qua result, to the ideal identity of the objective, and ... to the univocity of presence and being’. However, the ‘as if’ of the idea of the infinite and ‘God in me’ are glossed here as *enigmas*, a term whose technical significance is only developed after *Totality and Infinity* (notably in the essay, ‘Enigma and Phenomenon’). The status of the encounter with *l’Autrui* is still liminal or illusory even if the results projected do not end with Being but with an infinite projection of the ethical as a level above being and presence, whose effects are not reducible to results *comprehended* at that lower level. ‘From Consciousness to Wakefulness’ in *DEwH* pp. 153-168; p. 195 fn. 26.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Heidegger shows us in what intoxication the lucid sobriety of philosophers is steeped.’ Levinas ‘Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity’, p.53.

<sup>83</sup> ‘The relation with the Other does not only stimulate, provoke generalization, does not only supply it with the pretext and the occasion (this no one has ever contested), but is this generalization itself. Generalization is a universalization – but universalization is not the entry of a sensible thing into a no man’s land of the ideal ... but is the offering of the world to the Other.’ [TI 173-174]



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engendered. As Abensour notes, the third, introduced by the encounter with *Autrui* institutes justice by regulating ‘*la folie éthique*’<sup>84</sup>.

The problem that Levinas inherits is what Kant termed ‘fanaticism’: the ‘delusion of wanting to see beyond the bounds of sensibility’<sup>85</sup>. As Levinas notes, the danger is that I mistake the face as the idea of the infinite, ‘the universal being the other incarnates’, for the face of a particular being – I mistake the encounter that characterises *Autrui* for the encounter with the other person as concrete being [*Autre*]<sup>86</sup>. Reason has desire for the infinite but not the power to attain it. The desire for the Other qua *Autrui* can turn the ego into a fanatic who pursues this private goal at the expense of the neighbour. This danger of the ‘complicity of a private relation’ [TI 212] can only be averted by the founding of political institutions<sup>87</sup>; the foundation of a society in which the encounter with the Other would no longer be private and wracked by privation. A society must be created which would *both* reconfigure the contingent given *and* regulate the encounter with the Other, which might otherwise remain an intimate delusion. But this project is without guarantee: ‘... to be worthy of the messianic era one must admit that ethics has a meaning, even without the promises of the Messiah.’ [E&I 114]

If society is not so transformed then there is no meaning. Thus, again, we must strictly reject the contemporary conflation of the idea of the Other as *Autrui* with the more familiar idea of respect for the way in which the other person exceeds my cognitive appropriations. There is no grammar of everyday morality for Levinas, only a transcendence which demands social transformation, which would extend well beyond my own death, as its validation; “*ordinary life*” is *precisely the problem to be overcome*. It is in this particular mode of futurity that

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<sup>84</sup> Abensour ‘*L’Etat de la justice*’ p. 56.

<sup>85</sup> *Critique of Judgment* [1790] translated by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1987), p. 135 ff..

<sup>86</sup> ‘Is Ontology Fundamental?’ (1951) in *Basic Philosophical Writings* edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley & Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 1-10; p. 7.

<sup>87</sup> ‘In order to oppose inward freedom to the absurd and its violence it is necessary to have received an education. Hence freedom would cut into the real only by virtue of institutions.’ [TI 241]



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Rosenzweig distanced his work from paganism. Levinas distances himself from Heidegger's paganistic valorisation of the particular land<sup>88</sup>. Paganism is that form of nationalism which does not see the necessity of the task of *transformation of the land*<sup>89</sup>. In this regard, the adoption of Levinas by many self-justificatory liberal theories serves only to shore up a bourgeois fanaticism which wallows in its paganism<sup>90</sup>.

Such an argument finds its echo in 'Violence and Metaphysics, where, in a discussion of Kant relegated to a footnote, Derrida muses about the meaning of the absence of a 'patient and systematic confrontation with Kant' and insists that, without the order of law, 'respect and the other no longer escape empirical and pathological immediacy' [VM 401 fn. 26].

### The Excellence of Europe – *un gage*

The putative excellence of the Judaeo-Christian West lies, not in a return to its traditional beliefs and practices, but in distilling those beliefs into ideas that valorise the human as the germ of infinity who forms the site for a futural task that produces transcendent meaning.

Levinas does not offer a theory of superiority based on racial essentialism. But if one comes from a culture where there is no conception of the other person as Other, as infinite, then this experience would be covered over. This is the spiritual peril with which China and the 'masses' of the underdeveloped world threaten Europe. Either they have only a language of 'daily chores' and

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<sup>88</sup> Derrida opposes this 'violent' reading of Heidegger as it is developed in the essay 'Heidegger, Gagarin et nous' to insist Heidegger is not interested in a nationalistic attachment to site, but the 'irruption of speech and promise' [VM 408-9 fn. 79].

<sup>89</sup> 'The metaphysical desire does not long to return, for it is desire for a land not of our birth, for a land foreign to every nature, which has not been our fatherland and to which we shall never betake ourselves. ... The metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness – the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it.' [TI 33-34]

<sup>90</sup> 'Consciousness then does not consist in equaling being with representation ... but in overflowing this play of lights – this phenomenology – and in accomplishing *events* whose ultimate signification (contrary to the Heideggerian conception) does not lie in *disclosing*.' [TI 27-28]



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‘commonplace talk’ or they have concepts which preclude the ethical response to the presentation of the face of the other. In Heidegger’s terms, tacitly informing Levinas, they remain at an inauthentic, everyday level. This is why, in contrast to the metaphysics of separation sought by Levinas, those coming from outside Europe are described as ‘hordes’ or ‘masses’: they are fundamentally incapable of metaphysical *pluralism*<sup>91</sup>.

Yet the epiphany of the face remains a possibility, or ‘choice’, for human existents. The question to be decided, for Levinas, is: will the envy of the underdeveloped world and China produce a geo-political threat against which Europe must brace itself, or can Africa and Asia be converted to our excellence?<sup>92</sup>

Let us note that Levinas does not believe that Europe has indeed achieved this possibility, rather that in Europe the conditions of possibility – general freedom from the underdeveloped or proletarian condition and the cultural familiarity of these ideas – exist for creating this transformed politics. Thus Levinas is not simply producing an apology for Europe – he is calling upon Europe to build upon its excellence to produce a wholly new form of State: the State of Justice must be made *manifest to all*. Levinas does not seek to uphold one form of existing political totality over another – he believes that by translating Judaic ethics into Greek philosophy a new form of political project will be launched: the transformation of the world through the overcoming of the conditions that limit the possibility of ethical response. The concomitant result of this drive for peace is to produce meaning in the human world – this project overcomes the nihilism

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<sup>91</sup> Levinas is already aware of his breach of political correctness *avant la lettre*. ‘Idolatry, that is no doubt the State, the prototype of idolatry, since the State adores being and idol; idolatry, that is also the cult of the Greek gods and hence all the appeal of Hellenism. It is probably because it evokes Greece that idolatry can still be preferred to something else! But idolatry also encompasses all the intellectual temptations of the relative, of exoticism and fads, all that comes to us from India and China, all that comes to us from the alleged “experiences” of humanity which we would not be permitted to reject.’ Emmanuel Levinas ‘And God created Woman’ in *Nine Talmudic Readings* [1970] translated by Annette Aronowicz; (Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 169-76, p. 176. Note that, as in Rosenzweig, the idolatry of the pagan Greeks is held to be superior to that of India and China.

<sup>92</sup> This would further support Caygill’s comments that Levinas’s geo-political simplifications are akin to those of Heidegger regarding Germany’s place between the USA and the USSR [*L&P* 185].



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which resulted from the death of God. That is, Europe finds itself with two horizons: the horizon of catastrophe in which its excellence is lost and the horizon of the production of the State of Justice. Politics, for Levinas, is produced in the negotiation of these two temporalities<sup>93</sup>.

Must we then valorise the reasoning lucidity of *Realpolitik* – the foreseeing of war and the deployment of every means in order to win or avert it? Levinas writes:

‘The moral consciousness can sustain the mocking gaze of the political man only if the certitude of peace dominates the evidence of war. Such a certitude is not obtained from a simple play of antitheses. The peace of empires issued from war rests on war. It does not restore to the alienated beings their lost identity. For that a primordial and original relation with being is needed.’ [TI 22]

Let us emphasise the *certitude* of peace. This certitude is not a teleological result of dialectics or a fear of mutually assured destruction. It finds its source in a primordial relation beyond being – the epiphany of the face of the other as idea of the infinite. This produces peaceful orientation – it points towards a more fundamental possibility of subjective existence which can become enshrined in a new form of political organisation. It is from this perspective that Miguel Abensour presents Levinas as the “Counter-Hobbes”<sup>94</sup>. Against the rational pursuit of self-interest and self-presentation that brings people together for mutual advantage, Levinas envisions the possibility of sociality being produced by shared desire for the Other as metaphysical desire. A sociality which must be both preserved and checked by novel institutions of law and justice – the inverse of the constriction of hostility in other accounts.

Levinas’s speculative wager is that the State of Justice which enframes and regulates this certitude of peace *justifies* the affirmation of the illusion of the Idea

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<sup>93</sup> ‘Holy history is not quite what it seemed, an unconditional call for justice, but suffers from equivocations arising from its unacknowledged partiality towards universal history. Holy history, it seems, is vulnerable and its universal claims open to compromise or distortion, addressing only a part of humanity, or, perhaps even more disastrously, addressing that part of humanity that considers itself to be the whole of humanity.’ [L&P 182]

<sup>94</sup> *op. cit.*



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of the infinite. Metaphysical philosophy would be validated through its instantiation<sup>95</sup>.

The excellence of the Judaeo-Christian legacy lies in its valorisation of transcendence<sup>96</sup>. The idea of the infinite encountered in the face is an illusion, a speculative wager only confirmed in the production of a new, *superior* form of political institution informed by moral response - the idea (desire for the infinite) that produces a transformed mode of existing. Here again theme from Cohen arises:

*'The ethical value of messianism consists in this its political, one would say philosophy of history, meaning. The history of peoples as the history of humanity – that is the problem of prophetic messianism. Peace shall happen here on earth among people, among peoples. The swords shall be beaten into pruning hooks. This irreconciled opposition to what history calls world-politics lies in prophetic messianism. Therein lies a moral original power; the mightiest idea which ethics has borrowed and admitted from a province foreign to the philosophical method; the most instructive example for the insoluble historical connection between ethics and religion.'*<sup>97</sup>

Or: *'There will be no peace among nations unless our example is followed.'*<sup>98</sup>

### Speculation and the Judgment of History

Visker has commented on the peculiar 'penance' of contemporary anthropology that has turned on the Western imagination as its object, but where there is no courthouse for this reason itself<sup>99</sup>. The courthouse for Levinas's project can only

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<sup>95</sup> The orientation towards the other is also a going beyond one's own epoch. Levinas advocates the work of Leon Blum who works towards the goal of Israel even while incarcerated by the Nazis in 1941. The 'summit of nobility' is to 'act for far off things' in the moment of Hitler's triumph. Levinas excoriates any nostalgia, especially that which finds its expression in the longing for salvation. Political destiny requires a work that goes into the future: 'There is a vulgarity and a baseness in an action that is conceived only for the immediate, that is, in the last analysis, for our life.' [MS 50-51]

<sup>96</sup> Bernasconi notes that the universality contained in Judaism lies in election: the people in receipt of the law equates to a humanity that has 'reached the fullness of its responsibilities'. He expresses strong reservations about the manner in which this is then transposed on to a schema that distinguishes 'self-conscious' from 'childlike' humanity. Bernasconi 'Who is the Other? Who is the neighbor?' pp. 16-17.

<sup>97</sup> Cited in Gibbs *Why Ethics? Signs of Responsibilities* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 341.

<sup>98</sup> §41 *Deutschtum und Jugendum* cited by Derrida 'Interpretations at War', p. 183.

<sup>99</sup> *Truth and Singularity* p. 148 ff.



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be history itself. It bets on the future substantiated superiority of a secularized religious tradition. The question of parochialism or universal applicability is only determined by a global transformation. It is no longer a matter of *Europe's self-respect*. As such, the stakes for such a practical reason are high (assuming they are not already). It is not clear though what space is left for *political judgment* or *self-criticism*.

The suspicion is that the meta-theoretical framework of Levinas's project troubles any means for diagnosing the particularities of any particular situation; for would this kind of acumen not require a *theoretical* analysis of being? Sanford points to this problem:

'If, on the one hand, however, this forcible insistence on the relationship between philosophy and politics is part of the immediate attraction of Levinas's work – and that part which makes it *seem* as though it may be used as a resource in thinking every left-leaning or social-emancipatory (especially feminist and post-colonial) struggle – this sits, on the other hand, in extremely uneasy relationship with Levinas's unwillingness to think history or politics in terms of anything other than the same.' [ML 19-20]

It is not clear that there is any space for historical or political *science* in a Levinasian formation<sup>100</sup>. Such a weakness is clear from Levinas's writing on Israel, which could be thought to represent the concrete instantiation of the State of Justice given its peculiar fusion of European democratic institutions and religious orientation. Levinas's writings and comments on Israel stretch over roughly thirty years or so<sup>101</sup>. It is only in the 1980s that the early optimism for a exemplary pioneer state seems to diminish<sup>102</sup>. Caygill is correct to note that it is

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<sup>100</sup> Rose's comments on Adorno appear equally pertinent to Badiou and Levinas: 'It thus remains in a realm of infinite striving or task, a morality, in the limited sense which Hegel criticized: a general prescription not located in the social relations which underlie it, and hence incapable of providing any sustained and rigorous analysis of those relations.' [*Hegel contra Sociology* p. 33]

<sup>101</sup> See Chapter 5 of *Levinas and the Political* for an excellent survey of Levinas's judgments regarding Israel.

<sup>102</sup> See *Is it Righteous to be?* (1986) – where the valorisation of the adventure of Israel is reduced to a discussion of his inability to talk about many things 'because I am not in Israel running its risks'. This latter position is opposed to his earlier comments about the Diaspora forming the specific novelty of Israel's state. Even the Interview from 1982, cited in the opening remarks to this chapter, insists: *no one* can say "You are not in Israel, you are not allowed to judge." Even within this three or four years, Levinas's position with respect to Israel has become more pessimistic and realistic. *Is it Righteous to be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* [1986] edited by Jill Robbins (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001)



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Levinas's systematic philosophy which leads him to overestimate the possibilities of Israel:

'The danger of Levinas's position lies in not fully recognising that the State of Israel is a modern state among states. While he does not lapse into the messianic paranoia of the Israeli right, he is nevertheless in danger of promoting idolatry, or the archaic myth of Israel as a settler society, even twenty years after it had become a nation-state.' [L&P 165]

Levinas misses that the lapse into *Realpolitik* had already happened as the 'painful necessities of the occupation' slowly undid any ethical possibility. Tellingly, precisely those reservations expressed by Derrida in *Alterités* become *philosophical differences* once the truth content of a position is mortgaged to its political imposition<sup>103</sup>. Section V of Derrida's 'A Word of Welcome' explicitly addresses this question of Zionism and political judgment. Questioning Levinas's comments on 'political invention' in Israel<sup>104</sup>, he writes:

'Has this *political invention* in Israel ever come to pass? Ever come to pass in Israel? ... does one have the right here to silence such an interrogation, before these words of Levinas, and in the spirit that inspires them? Would such a silence be worthy of the responsibilities that we have been assigned? First of all, before Emmanuel Levinas himself? I am among those who await this "political invention" in Israel, among those who call for it in hope, today more than ever because of the despair that recent events ... have not attenuated ...' [Adieu 81]

To this reticent disquiet, we might add that the content of the novel ethical framework of *Totality and Infinity* is severely restricted in its thematisation of apology. In opposition to *virile history*, apology would appear to consist in 'incessantly supplying a datum' to the consideration of the judge [TI 242]. This extra prevents discourse gelling into a totality<sup>105</sup>.

'Whoever speaks attends his manifestation, is non-adequate to the meaning that the hearer would like to retain of it as a result acquired outside of the very relationship of discourse .... Language is the incessant surpassing of the *Sinngebung* by the signification.' [TI 296]

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<sup>103</sup> In particular, the reference to differences over questions of history, strategy and politics. Jacques Derrida and Pierre-Jean Labarrière *Altérités* (Paris, Éditions Osiris, 1986), pp. 74-5.

<sup>104</sup> *Beyond the Verse* p. 191.

<sup>105</sup> 'Judgment must be borne upon a will that could defend itself during the adjudication and through its apology be present at its trial, and does not disappear into the totality of a coherent discourse.' [TI 243]



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But this repetitive stress on *incessant overflowing* of speech already given by saying leaves the apology close to the filibuster, or a compulsive donation ill-equipped to break with the position condemned earlier of the benefactor *who needs the beneficiary as the opportunity to demonstrate beneficence*. The overbearing host can oppress the guest with generosity<sup>106</sup>.

But it is precisely this incessant apology, resisting the judgment of institutional history which differentiates Levinas's speculation from that of Hegel, which for the former is the 'thought of successful mourning' [*L&P* 56]. This fundamental opposition to any *final* reconciliation of the real and reason unites Rosenzweig and Levinas – this vision is not utopian for Levinas since it does not either bring time to an end or valorise it in asymptotic approximation. The resistance of the individual to totality splits time into the 'destiny' of totality and the 'vocation' of conscience in the ever-renewed demand on the present – the *hic et nunc*<sup>107</sup>. Apology is never 'successful' in this sense – though, we should ask in what sense 'peace' is not a 'result' even if it requires an infinite correcting.

### The Infinity of Time: Fecundity

As announced by the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, war threatens morality to the extent that we must ask whether we are not duped by it [*TI* 21]. It demolishes all illusions and ensures that the personal egoism, *that seeks only its own*

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<sup>106</sup> Derrida briefly references Pierre Klossowski's *Roberte Ce Soir* in the context of hospitality, the dwelling and the welcome of the feminine other. Written in 1953, this text in conjunction with *Totality and Infinity's* sections on the Dwelling, Love and Eros produces an intriguing constellation which might repay future work [*Adieu* p. 42-3]. 'In order that the host's curiosity not degenerate into jealousy or suspicion, it is for you, the guest, to discern the hostess' essence in the mistress of the house, for you to cast her forth from potentiality into existence: either the hostess remains sheer phantasm and you a stranger in this house if you leave to the host the inactualized essence of the hostess; or else you are indeed that angel, and by your presence you give an actuality to the hostess: you shall have full power over her as well as over the host. ... Whereupon the host shall be master in his house no more: he shall have carried out his mission. In his turn he shall have become the guest.' Pierre Klossowski *Roberte Ce Soir* [1953] translated by Austryn Wainhouse (New York & London, Marion Boyars Publishers, 1989), p. 16. The notion of angelical visitation that determines the "Rule of Hospitality" might be connected to Derrida's use of the term to discuss hospitality. But again, recalling Skinner, this might simply be fanciful 'reminiscence' on my part. In the English edition of *Adieu*, it is the only reference made by Derrida that is *not* glossed by the translator.

<sup>107</sup> This distinction between 'destiny' and 'vocation' is Mosès's (*Au delà de la guerre* p. 62). However in German, *Bestimmung* would cover both senses.



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*personal salvation is refuted* [TI 25]. ‘Interiority cannot replace universality.’ Only a political dimension is adequate to the threat of war:

‘Apolitical freedom is to be explained as an illusion due to the fact that its partisans or its beneficiaries belong to an advanced stage of political evolution. An existence that is free, and not a velleity for freedom, presupposes a certain organization of nature and of society; the sufferings of torture, stronger than death, can extinguish inward freedom.’ [TI 241]

But why does not war also extinguish the *illusory* structure of ethical orientation?<sup>108</sup> Again, it would do so were it not for a further dimension of the topography – one that was already discussed in our brief treatment of the feminine other. Fecundity and the family are needed to ensure the unlimited infinity of the *future* ‘without which goodness would be *subjectivity and folly*’ [TI 280]. This future is determined by the ethical figure of ‘pardon’ which enables new beginning unburdened of the past – nothing is irrevocable if every instant is the first<sup>109</sup>.

Truth requires as its ‘ultimate condition’ this infinity projected into the future: it ensures transcendence by ensuring the ‘convergence of morality and reality’ [TI 245, 247, 306]. It must take ‘concrete form’ through ‘paternity’<sup>110</sup>, or remain only an illusory ‘image of eternity’: one is then entitled to re-vision the *actual* as a *vestibule for the future* [TI 301]. Here, one can note the equivocation, not to say contradiction, in these analyses. ‘Convergence of morality and reality’ suggests a *necessary* transformation of being via institutions to justify the idea of the infinite, yet we have seen how Levinas shies away from the infinite approximation of being in favour of an endeavour at another level, the ethical, *without end*.

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<sup>108</sup> ‘Does not the salvation of morality by means of an appeal to eschatology simply displace the site of deception, replacing the danger of being duped by morality with that of being duped by eschatology?’ [L&P 106-07]

<sup>109</sup> Mosès *Au-delà de la guerre* p. 114. It is important to stress the dimension of *futurity* in opposition to the past. Contra Proust, Levinas insists that ‘true temporality’ lies in moving beyond regret for ‘past occasions’. On three occasions from this period he rejects ‘*la recherche du temps perdu*’ [TI 282; DEwH 128; DEwH 145].

<sup>110</sup> ‘*La paternité est en effet cette expérience dans laquelle le Moi, tout en restant enraciné dans son essence propre, se voit en même temps appelé à la forme d’amour la plus désintéressée qui soit.*’ Mosès *Au-delà de la guerre* p. 54. ‘Paternity is in fact that experience in which the Ego, while remaining wholly rooted in its own essence, finds itself called by the most disinterested form of love there can be.’ [my translation]



We mentioned that the family overcame the potential private complicity of erotic love, but it also is the means by which the political rejigging of Judaism is accomplished. The family, which maintains the continuity of the project through the totalizing continuity of world-time, is the very ‘source of human time’. Once the concept of election is introduced, this paleonymy is complete: the coordinates of Jewish tradition become politico-philosophical categories<sup>111</sup>. The ‘unicity’ of *election* is found in obedience to the father<sup>112</sup>. And in this election, a certain circularity evidences itself; fraternity is based on the structure of filiality mimetic of monotheism: ‘... because my position as an I is *effectuated* already in fraternity the face can present itself to me as face.’ [TI 280] As Mosès notes, there is a fundamental asymmetry here – I must have been addressed as ‘*tu*’ myself to confer this upon the other<sup>113</sup>.

Raised as chosen, the child learns to see others as chosen, too: ‘I am I and chosen one, but where can I be chosen, if not from among other chosen ones, among equals?’ [TI 279]. The very notion of face is explicitly tied to Judaic teaching and familial ritual: it depends on *upbringing*. It is not clear whether this familial supplement is enough to escape the reservations around ethics and politics covered above. Surely, war holds the possibility of breaking even this ancestral handing-down?<sup>114</sup> And what of Adorno and Horkheimer’s suspicion of the disenchanted, enlightened world and its ‘triumphant calamity’<sup>115</sup>? Levinas concludes his essay on Lévy-Bruhl with the rhetorical question:

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<sup>111</sup> Cf. Caygill’s comments on the relation of prophetic politics to Jewish identity [L&P 129].

<sup>112</sup> ‘He [the son] is unique for himself because he is unique for the father.’ [TI 279]

<sup>113</sup> ‘... le moment de la Révélation, celui où le Moi méta-éthique se transforme en Je, est précisément celui où il découvre sa dépendance par rapport à une réalité qui l’investit de l’extérieur.’ [op. cit. p. 36]. ‘... the moment of Revelation, in which the meta-ethical Ego transforms itself into an ‘I’, is precisely that moment where it discovers its dependence by relation on a reality which invests it from the exterior’. I agree with this general point, but would insist that in *Totality and Infinity* it is determined by the *paternal-filial* relation (hence *male*) and depends on encountering the *height* of ‘vous’, not ‘tu’.

<sup>114</sup> Levinas’s dimension of fecundity as an attempt to ensure the infinite time for convergence is perhaps a reconfiguring of Husserl’s generations of scientists passing on the products of the tradition. See Appendix A on Husserl’s *Crisis*-period to substantiate this claim.

<sup>115</sup> Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer *Dialectic of Enlightenment – Philosophical Fragments* edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr [1987] & translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 1.



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*‘Mais la civilisation issue du monothéisme n’est-elle pas capable de répondre à cette crise – par une orientation, libérée de l’horreur des mythes, des troubles qu’ils provoquent dans les esprits et des cruautés qu’ils perpétuent dans les mœurs?’*<sup>116</sup>

### Conclusion

Our efforts in these first two chapters have been directed to foregrounding the importance of Levinas’s connection to the tradition of practical transformation guided by ideas. As to our main question, we can see that all humans are others in the sense of concrete subjectivities under the concept of fraternity, but that not all humans can encounter the face of the Other as an idea of the infinite owing to the concrete obstacles of basic material needs and the variation in the socio-cultural. Ironically, given the popular reception of Levinas, it is the concept of the face *itself* which generates this problem. To repeat, the idea of infinity is not ‘given’ in an experience of the human face. For Levinas himself this position, in its uncritical humanism, would be akin to a well-meaning liberal fanaticism, not to say paganism, which could only ever valorise the current contingent instantiation of things. It lacks any sense of the infinity of transcendence as exteriority and *separation*.

The exclusion of Africa and Asia is constitutive – it springs from the core of Levinas’s philosophy. Levinas’s notion of alterity as *height* is mortgaged to the *exclusion* of the alterity of these other cultures as *different and equal*. Through the optic of ethnography, we can see Levinas’s project as a philosophical anthropology – uncovering the excellence of Western Europe’s concrete social being. From this insight springs the prophetic resistance to paganism and barbarism which function as if they were technical descriptions of other cultures. But beyond the championing of Judaism, and the recourse to Rosenzweig’s weak analysis (a hangover from the nineteenth century), it is hard to see how Levinas supports this contention of superiority except with reference to the future

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<sup>116</sup> ‘Levy-Bruhl et la philosophie contemporaine’, p. 63. ‘But that civilisation which issued from monotheism, isn’t it capable of responding to this crisis – by an orientation, freed from the horror of myths, the troubles they stir up in spirits and the cruelties they perpetuate in customs?’ [my translation]



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peaceful outcome of the *speculative political project* and its purported resonance with our own upbringing in this tradition.

Next, we turn to Derrida's reading of Levinas in 'Violence and Metaphysics'. There we will see a different, more theoretical, form of speculation, which sees this recourse to religious tradition as part of a general metaphysical problem.



## Part Two

### *Au Cœur du Chiasme: the exchange between Levinas and Derrida*

Part One of this thesis detailed Levinas's theory of the Other as found in *Totality and Infinity*. It insisted on the speculative, *practical* dimension of that project. Part Two, turns to Jacques Derrida's engagement with Levinas and the repercussions that ensued. Its focus is on four texts, written over nearly twenty years:

1. Derrida's long review essay, 'Violence and Metaphysics', which surveys Levinas's output up to and including *Totality and Infinity*;
2. Levinas's very short piece on Derrida: 'Wholly Otherwise';
3. the late work, *Otherwise than Being*, which is taken to respond to Derrida's earlier criticisms;
4. Derrida's Levinas *Festschrift* essay, 'At this Very Moment...'

Some commentators, such as Critchley, present these essays as a constructive back and forth or convivial exchange between the two, which amounts to an ethico-political alliance. This ties in with a certain understanding of deconstruction as a mode of writing distinct in the philosophical tradition, and, in particular, distinct from *criticism*. Such a reading tends to privilege a 'gift' economy, with each contribution augmenting the other's writing. This fails to come to terms with the major *philosophical* differences between the two.

Chapter Three offers a reading of the first text, while supplementing it with a survey of Derrida's other writings from the 1960s. Chapter Four concentrates on *Otherwise than Being*, published in 1974, and the claim that Levinas's introduction of the new distinction between the Saying and the Said (*le Dire et le Dit*) escapes the main criticisms advanced by Derrida. Chapter Five uses the two other essays named above to emphasise the persistent dispute regarding the interpretation of language, history and being.



## Chapter Three

### Derrida's critique of Levinas in 'Violence and Metaphysics'

This chapter argues that 'Violence and Metaphysics' should be read as a *critique* of *Totality and Infinity*. There is a three-fold dimension to this critique. First, it rejects Levinas's reading of history and the history of philosophy as the domination of the Other by the Same. Second, it disputes Levinas's positioning within the phenomenological tradition: the final half of the essay is devoted to contesting his readings of Husserl and Heidegger. Finally, it challenges the conception of language operating, but barely thematised, within *Totality and Infinity*; in particular, it concentrates on problems of philosophical presentation and the claim to break with the history of philosophy while remaining dependent on its conceptual resources. This last point could be summed up by the question: how does Levinas *authorize* himself to write what he does? Derrida concludes that Levinas's discourse is indistinguishable from empiricism or a *pre-Kantian* thematic.

In addition to these criticisms, in the second half of this chapter, I emphasise the space Derrida devotes to a programmatic statement of his own speculative project, *in contrast* to Levinas's. The key co-ordinates relate to language, history and being, which are grouped under the rubric of a philosophy of *original finitude* (thus explicitly rejecting Levinas's championing of the positive Infinite). In the chapters following, I will subject the claims for an affinity between the two to close analysis: such an assertion is based on a failure to attend to "metaphysical" differences which determine modalities of alterity, or otherness, so different that we should perhaps treat the two uses merely as homonyms.

Those points aside, Derrida does include Levinas within the 'community of the question': those thinkers who are raising questions which philosophy is currently unable to solve [VM 98-102]. Precisely because those questions have perhaps not been philosophy's questions, they are capable of producing a 'profound troubling' [*solliciter profondement*] of philosophy through the 'irruption of the totally-other' [VM 190]. However, despite the legitimate attempt to put thought



## Chapter 3 Derrida's critique of Levinas in "Violence and Metaphysics"

today in question, Derrida still insists that these questions 'must be examined unrelentingly' [VM 98]. That is, the *non-philosophical* that challenges philosophy might remain at the level of non-philosophy. As we will see, this is the danger Derrida espies in *Totality and Infinity*. That it uses up philosophical materials does not guarantee its status.

### I

## History and the History of Philosophy

As we saw in the previous two chapters, Levinas's philosophy is oriented to a break from both anonymous being and history as a totalising structure that determines *meaning*. The "West" names both the philosophical tradition and the history in which it has developed, where theoretical reason dominates in its equation of the real with rationality<sup>1</sup>. The "human", as distinct from the animal and the vegetable, is marked out by its cultural level, understood as a break from both primitive 'participation' and an 'absurd' existence dominated by meeting pressing need (glossed as 'underdeveloped'). Phenomenology can interpret the fundamental structures expressed by the variety of cultures, but in order to understand the excellence of Europe, it must privilege the Judaic (Christian) concept of the human individual<sup>2</sup> and the manner in which it is the site of the 'breakup' of totality.

This break-up is also that of consciousness (phenomenologically understood as that which allows the manifestation of being). Importantly, this break-up is refractory to all theoretical *knowledge*. It can find no place in an account of that which has existed or which currently exists: it escapes science or any attempt to understand history as a teleology of reason. Levinas reads all theoretical attempts to interpret the world *qua given* as *immanentist*. As cited in the previous chapter, an 'anarchy of facts' can only be broken by the question of value, yet, for him, value is only found in that which breaches this theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> Caygill presents *Totality and Infinity* as a 'report' resulting from the investigation into the complicity between philosophical and political totality [L&P 94].

<sup>2</sup> The individual is not the *general* concept of the 'person'.



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enterprise of learning. Philosophers and scientists have only interpreted the world as given.

Again, Levinas fears any such dominance by the given as a form of 'barbarism'. As Derrida notes, this applies to all theoretical philosophy: 'Incapable of respecting the being and meaning of the other, phenomenology and ontology would be philosophies of violence. Through them, the entire philosophical tradition, in its meaning and at bottom, would make common cause with oppression and with the totalitarianism of the same.' [VM 113]

The apparent synonymy of "being"- "given"- "same" is determined by the privileging of the other as that source of value drawn from beyond<sup>3</sup>. That said, the model for this activity of the individual as that which produces, but is always left out of, history is taken from Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry'<sup>4</sup>. Though, for Husserl, this 'inner history' is not understood as originating from 'beyond being', in his emphasis on the *results* of the generations working towards scientific achievement, the individuals are lost.

Levinas's theory of institutions understands that human freedom depends on the 'written text' of the law, but that these impersonal structures open the possibility

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<sup>3</sup> Several pages towards the end of 'Violence and Metaphysics' contest Levinas's interpretation of Heideggerian "Being" (*Sein*). Derrida twice remarks that the former had understood the ontological distinction between Being and beings much better in his work prior to *Totality and Infinity* and insists that this distinction cannot be understood as attesting to the "subordination" of beings to Being. Being has no power or effect such that it governs. In addition, "letting-be" (*Sein-lassen*) is *now*, in *Totality and Infinity*, presented as a relation of comprehension of knowledge, when previously Levinas had written the opposite. On Derrida's reading of Heidegger, Being is not a concept or an 'abstract, indeterminate predicate' (the concept is on the 'plane of ontic determination', not that of "Being"); indeed, he argues that letting-be is always to do with alterity and, above all, the alterity of the Other [VM 169-76]. We might see here an equivocation owing to the neo-Kantian Platonism of figures like Cohen who distinguish the Idea from Being in a manner that clashes with a phenomenological analysis; where the Husserlian *epochē* is designed *precisely* to suspend these classical metaphysical oppositions in favour of *sense-investigation*. Here, it is not clear to me how Levinas could effect a 'radicalisation' of intentional analysis by escaping the restraint of the noema-noesis structure [L&P 99] – would it not then cease to be *transcendental phenomenology as such*? Heidegger persists with a form of intentional analysis but does not believe that it reaches the *Evidenz* sought by Husserl. The 'enigmas' [*Rätsel*] located are instead only resolved in authentic resolution – *Selbstbestimmung* as opposed to *Selbstbesinnung*.

<sup>4</sup> 'The historical world is ... first pre-given as a socio-historical world. But it is historical only through the inner historicity of each individual [*durch die innere Geschichtlichkeit jeder Einzelnen*], who are individuals in their inner historicity, together with that of other communalized persons.' [*Ursprung* 174 translation modified]. For more detail, see Appendix A.



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of another 'tyranny': the inhumanity of works alienated [TI 243] and the 'unrecognition of the worker' [TI 297]. Co-opting Husserl's distinction between indication and expression, the judgment of history, made in the third person, only operates on the evidences of *indicative signs*<sup>5</sup>. The other is excluded from such 'totalities' or 'consistencies', as is the Other, since the face cannot manifest meaningfully<sup>6</sup>. Levinas avers that 'the human really is only in expression', hence the crucial task of *apology* to maintain that expressive moment: 'Judgment must be borne upon a will that could defend itself during the adjudication and through its apology be present at its trial, and *does not disappear into the totality of a coherent discourse*.' [TI 243 my emphasis] This 'vigilance' of apology reactivates expression by 'making present' the 'invisible' that cannot enter the evidence of history<sup>7</sup>. But in *goodness*, this production evades being recuperated by those evidences: 'Justice consists in again making possible expression, in which in non-reciprocity the person presents himself as unique.' [TI 297] The opposition of history and eschatology 'surprises' Derrida [VM 153], for the way in which the beyond is opposed to a 'finite totality' appears as a presupposition<sup>8</sup>. However, Levinas repeatedly takes up the results of Husserl and Heidegger only to reinterpret them. Here, Husserl's teleological twist on phenomenology is accepted in its reading of history, but Levinas shifts the *meaning* from the total product, science, to the neglected activity of subjects who produce it.

Nevertheless, here is located the first major difference between the two. Derrida insists that history is better understood as an *economy* or *system* within which transcendence is operating; 'a system ... neither finite nor infinite' [VM 153]; a system in which the same and the other interrelate and produce one another

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<sup>5</sup> Husserl *Logical Investigations* 'Investigation 1: Expression and Meaning' pp. 269 ff.

<sup>6</sup> In this regard, Levinas's ethical insistence on incessant apology can be connected to the Husserlian problem of *Sinnesveräußerlichung* (the emptying of sense) that accompanies empty, technical symbol manipulation [Crisis 44]. Abstract, developed mathematical sciences such as physics can degenerate into interpretations of formulae, *without* any grounding in the intuitive evidence of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*). Similarly, for Levinas, the spoken word is destined to be destined to alien *Sinngebung* without the rehabilitation of the work of truth [TI 227-28]. The concomitant problems of history, institutions and justice resemble Husserl's account of the passivity of sedimentation.

<sup>7</sup> 'The invisible must manifest itself if history is to lose its right to the last word, necessarily unjust for the subjectivity, inevitably cruel.' [TI 243]

<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Caygill takes the two to be mutually implicated rather than opposed; justice requires the *postponement and correction of institutional practices* [L&P 181].



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*without recourse to the 'beyond'.* We will consider this bare assertion more fully later when we turn (in the second part of this chapter) to the speculative programatics set out. Here, we concentrate on the central pages of 'Violence and Metaphysics', where Levinas' reading of canonical figures in the history of philosophy is challenged. The chief concern is the demonstration that this history already includes many of the themes relating to otherness. Not only does Levinas fail to break with a "Greek" tradition; not only is that history not dominated by the given; but Levinas reduces that history to the homogeneous tale excoriated under the rubric of history of the same. One can read Derrida as uncovering this symptomatic absence of care in Levinas's approach to the history of philosophy – lack of care towards these predecessors. One can see this section as warning Levinas that the break from philosophy is not so easy, since it seems that these figures have tried to think through the very problems that Levinas insists have always been ignored by neutralising reason.

In this vein, Derrida:

- nods to Feuerbach for the constellation of height, substance and face [VM 125] and an alternative form of anti-Hegelianism [VM 139];
- points out that Martin Buber had already anticipated the reservations expressed by Levinas with respect to the I-Thou relation [VM 401-02 fn. 37];
- argues that Kierkegaard does not simply support a protest for personal existence against a systematic totality, but for the category of subjective existence *in general* – 'his discourse is philosophical' [VM 137];
- raises doubts about the distinction made between Levinas's conception of Desire and that of Hegel: '... one rightly suspects that things would appear more complicated, if one followed closely the movement of certitude and the truth of desire in *Phenomenology of Mind*.' [VM 115];



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- locates, again in Hegel, *both* an insistence on the unity of the face prior to 'dispersion' amongst sense-organs [VM 125] *and* the neutralisation of desire by the eye, with the consequent privileging of hearing by both [VM 123 ff.];
- invokes Meister Eckhart, Malebranche and de Cusa to broaden out the debate over infinity, ontology, divinity and God [VM 182 ff.].

Besides these particular points, the main theme developed across the essay is whether philosophy can still be philosophy if it breaks with the founding gesture of its Greek departure: the decision to treat philosophy as science [VM 101]<sup>9</sup>. The conceptual, technical language of philosophy maintains this moment in the 'meta-physics' still used by Levinas [VM 102]<sup>10</sup>. If, as Levinas insisted in *Difficult Freedom*, the true grounds for all understanding depends on this Greek conceptuality, then the Greek tradition cannot simply be a *receptacle* for the Judaic 'message'.

'Such a site of encounter cannot only offer *occasional* hospitality to a thought which would remain foreign to it. And still less may the Greek absent himself, having loaned his house and his language, while the Jew and the Christian meet in his home .... Greece is not a neutral, provisional territory, beyond borders.' [VM 191]

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<sup>9</sup> This founding decision is replicated in the 'scientificity' of phenomenology. Derrida asks whether phenomenological *methodology* can be 'borrowed' when the cogency of this methodology depends on categories that have been rejected [VM 139]. Indeed, at points, Levinas seems to fluctuate between Heidegger and Husserl, criticising each 'from the language of the other' without chasing what that entails to the end [VM 121]. 'Can phenomenological method be borrowed like a tool?' [VM 147]. We can see here the echoes of the questions put to Levi-Strauss's *bricolage* in *Of Grammatology*: Levinas's metaphysics 'presupposes the transcendental phenomenology it seeks to put into question'. Though the 'legitimacy' of such questioning 'does not seem to us any less radical', it is perhaps no longer phenomenology or philosophy [VM 166]. 'The only weakness of *bricolage* ... is a total inability to justify itself in its own discourse. The already-there-ness of instruments and of concepts cannot be undone or re-invented. ... the passage from desire to discourse always loses itself in *bricolage*, it builds its castles with debris. In the best of cases, the discourse of *bricolage* can confess itself, confess in its desire and its defeat, ... recognize that the most radical discourse, the most inventive and systematic engineer are surprised and circumvented by a history, a language, etc., a *world* ... from which they must borrow their tools, if only to destroy the former machine... But that the engineer should always be a sort of *bricoleur* should not ruin all criticism of *bricolage*, quite the contrary.' [Gramm 139]

<sup>10</sup> 'One already foresees the unease to which a thought rejecting the excellence of theoretical rationality will have to resign itself later, especially in that it never ceases to appeal to the most uprooted rationalism and universalism against the violences of mysticism and history, against the ravishing of enthusiasm and ecstasy.' [VM 107]



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The 'rich alluvia' of Western philosophical history 'protects itself against the surprise' of Levinas as is demonstrated by locating the points in philosophy which Levinas has to suppress, misinterpret or ignore<sup>11</sup>. Derrida concentrates, in particular, on the acknowledged inheritance from Husserl and Heidegger and is painstaking in his contestation of Levinas's reading of the 'alter ego' in *Cartesian Meditations*. It is this presentation of an *alternative* reading of phenomenology which brings out some of the difference I am keen to impress. Therefore, I will attend in detail to these pages.

#### Husserl and Phenomenology

The discussion of Husserl yields two key points relating to Levinas:

1. The analysis of the *alter ego* in the Fifth *Cartesian Meditation* does not proceed as Levinas imagines.
2. No *absolute* otherness is possible.

Both of these points draw from an attention to the displaced notion of *objectivity* and how this displacement 'complicates the primacy of theoretical consciousness in Husserl' [VM 106]. Derrida suggests that Levinas has missed the manner in which in Husserl there are *two meanings to the theoretical* [VM 152]. Levinas's 'protest' would be aimed at that closest to the common understanding where only that which can be encompassed in clarity by pure reason is deemed to be relevant. This opposition to the privilege of clarity and light may appear close to deconstruction's problematization of the privilege accorded to the present and to living speech in Husserl<sup>12</sup>. But we should pay attention to the division in *Totality and Infinity* between vision and speech. Vision is the sense associated with science and practicality that enables the 'forgetting of the *il y a*' [TI 191]. Though it appears that science 'makes possible the transcending of the subjective condition of sensibility', Levinas concurs with Husserl's analysis of 'Origin of

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<sup>11</sup> As our first two chapters also demonstrate. It is not as if it is only the *religious, Judaic* thought of Rosenzweig that is co-opted – it is inseparable from the neo-Kantian transformation of those sources and hence inside a philosophical tradition.

<sup>12</sup> See *Speech and Phenomena*.



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Geometry' where the meaning of all scientific production is ultimately still validated by its grounding in the sensible [TI 192]. In contrast, the ethical and alterity do not *share the form* of things given in sensibility. The relation with the Other 'cuts across vision of forms' – its capacity is speech not vision [TI 193]<sup>13</sup>. Speech and alterity escape from the same in this manner.

Derrida notes, however, that the second dimension of the theoretical has been missed. It underlies and maintains appearing in general; this includes the *appearance of the nontheoretical*. Phenomenology attends to the differential manner in which different modalities of thought and language give themselves in appearance. This is in part the motivation of the *epochē*: ascription of existence, non-existence, reality and virtuality is suspended the better to analyse the mode of being-given [VM 151-2]. From here we can appreciate Derrida's stress on the misunderstanding that sees Husserl as entirely object-oriented: '... phenomenology has surely contributed nothing if not an infinite renewal, enlargement, and making more supple [*assoupli*] of the notion of object in general' [VM 151 translation modified]. With the result that, for Derrida, ethics can only 'take root' in the *prior domain of transcendental subjectivity*<sup>14</sup>. Phenomenology enables one to speak of ethical *noemas* in their originality without insisting that they be modelled on 'real' objects [VM 152].

'I know the meaning of the nontheoretical as such (for example, ethics or the metaphysical in Levinas's sense), with a theoretical knowledge (in general), and I respect it as such, as what it is, in its meaning. I have regard for recognizing that which cannot be regarded as a thing, as a façade, as a theorem. I have regard for the face itself.' [VM 152-3]

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<sup>13</sup> See also the second section of the third chapter of *Existence and Existents*, entitled 'Light'. Hypostasis is produced in the conjunction of light and knowing. Vision is the *event of suspension* that enables one to escape reactive 'compromise' with things. Phenomenality is existing for vision in light, only thereby is there a *world*. Light is the condition of the for-the-other. In this context, the *epochē* is the paradigmatic move of this form of consciousness [E&E 46 ff.]. In his 1940 essay, 'The Work of Edmund Husserl', one can find a similar claim: 'the whole of mental life is conceived on the model of light' [DEwH 61].

<sup>14</sup> In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida's reading of Husserl stresses the power of the intersubjective other, qua alter ego in its appresentation [*Appräsentation*], and the compound structure of the present that resist transcendental reduction to self-identity or *essence*. 'While this is against Husserl's express intention, it does take into account what is implied by his description of the movement of temporalization and of the relation with the other ....' [SP 52]



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### The Other and the Alter Ego

This expansion of the notion of object-status underpins Derrida's interpretation of the alter ego. He proceeds to challenge Levinas's presentation of the "Other" as overcoming the ethical, not to say violent, deficiencies of the alter ego. Let us recap the features of the encounter with the master.

Having described the basic structure of the ego, the self-sufficiency of enjoyment, Levinas describes the encounter that disrupts this autarky. What ruptures the enjoying ego is an experience of height or of mastery. This experience, the experience of the Other, is an experience of there-being-something-that-can-be-taught: the Other brings me more than I contain. The self-sufficiency of the ego is suspended and suspended in such a way that this experience of height is not simply overcome by the assimilation of information. This experience is such that I can no longer return to the comfort of enjoyment. Levinas interprets this moment as an experience of the *exteriority* of the Other. This is a metaphysical alteration to phenomenology's description of the 'lifeworld' or of *Mitsein*; the social structures I inhabit in my enjoyment are ruptured by this encounter with the Other; the ethical relation to the Other is produced in metaphysical desire for this exteriority.

It is important to distinguish this from the experience of the curious intellect who finds that a certain phenomena exceeds his or her cognitive powers: the Other is not experienced as a thwarted object of curiosity (as emphasised above, the Other has no form), but as a master, a teacher (the given does not issue from within the ego, but is received as taught), importantly, as the one before whom I must justify myself. It is more urgent and fundamental than the informed hesitation of judgment. It is visceral in that the previously self-sufficient ego can now find no rest in good conscience.

Levinas positions his break from Heidegger and Husserl by identifying a particular feature of intentional life that he takes to be of fundamental importance, but which exceeds phenomenality and phenomenology. It is premised upon an experience which is irreducible to the resources of



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phenomenology, yet dependent upon phenomenal experience for its "appearance" [VM 103]. It is understood as an everyday fact of moral life, yet the face is 'beyond all phenomenology', which can then not account for ethics, speech, and justice [VM 132]. Only an explicitly metaphysical supplement can do them justice, and in so doing Levinas puts into question phenomenology's possible claims to transcendental justification: 'the other [*autre*] is the other [*autre*] only if his alterity is absolutely irreducible ... infinitely irreducible; and the infinitely Other [*Autre*] can only be Infinity' [VM 129].

That is, for Levinas, the infinite alterity of the other cannot be captured by the description of the alter ego: 'by making the other ... the ego's phenomenon, constituted by an analogical appresentation on the basis of belonging to the the ego's own sphere, Husserl allegedly missed the infinite alterity of the other, reducing it to the same. To make other an alter ego, Levinas says frequently, is to neutralise its absolute alterity.' [VM 153] Derrida definitively rejects this reading.

First, the break-up of phenomenality, the problem of inadequation in intentionality, is already Husserl's problem<sup>15</sup> in that it dominates the appearance of objects in general: 'the themes of non-presence contradict what makes phenomenology a metaphysics of presence *working it ceaselessly*' [VM 151]. In this regard, 'it is easy to show' that the alter ego, the other, is always presented to me as *originary nonpresence*<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, nonphenomenality, the fragmentation of original evidence in the other, is the ego's *intentional problem*. The description of the alter ego is a determinate attempt to break with the humanist thematization of the other as a general category.

Derrida reads Husserlian phenomenology as already concerned with the problem of respect for the other: 'For without the phenomenon of other as other no respect

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<sup>15</sup> 'This impossibility of adequation is so radical that neither the *originality* nor the *apodicticity* of evident truths are necessarily adequations.' [VM 150]

<sup>16</sup> For Derrida, no one has been more attentive to this 'singular and irreducible style of evidence' [VM 154]. This disagreement with Levinas goes all the way back to his dissertation: '... it is difficult to agree with E. Levinas that the whole of Husserl's thought is motivated by such an ontological presupposition. Besides, the thesis of Levinas is based only on texts that precede *Cartesian Meditations*.' *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy* pp. 203-4 fn. 4.



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would be possible. The phenomenon of respect supposes respect of phenomenality. And ethics, phenomenology.' [VM 151] That is, respect is allowing the other to appear; without its appearing as such, no encounter with the alter ego would be possible [VM 154 & CM 122].

'For it is impossible to encounter the alter ego (in the very form of the encounter described by Levinas), impossible to respect it in experience and in language, if this other, in its alterity, does not *appear* for an ego (in general). One could neither speak, nor have any sense of the totally other, if there was not a phenomenon of the totally other, or evidence of the totally other as such.' [VM 153-54]

Here, we should note that Derrida is not simply contesting Levinas's interpretation of Husserl, but further pressing Levinas: he must suppose the other as an ego, for his discourse to work as *phenomenology* [VM 137]<sup>17</sup>. It would be impossible to even speak of the Other, if we have not presupposed a form of appearing that is other in this way. That this is primary for Husserl can be seen in the insistence that the 'world' is an ideal correlate [*Gegenständlichkeit*] of that very intersubjective experience: I can experience a world only because I am in communion with others [CM 107].

#### The Phenomenological Impossibility of Absolute Otherness

This necessity of appearing moves us to the second point outlined above. On Derrida's commentary, there can be no *absolute* otherness for an avowed phenomenology. He suggests that the central theme of the *Cartesian Meditations* is the '*irreducibly mediate* nature of the intentionality aiming at the other as other' [VM 154]. Levinas has doubts over a form of mediation that would incorporate without remainder the otherness of the individual. Instead, it is a different form of mediation that Derrida takes to be essential if the other is to be respected: analogical appresentation, which respects the remainder, is necessary

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<sup>17</sup> Though Husserl himself stresses that '*alter* ego' refers to an alteration in *my* ego – 'the ego indicated by this expression being I myself in my ownness' – but where that 'ownness' is troubled [CM 94 & CM 110]. Another monadic structure is constituted within my ego: 'Somewhat as my memorial past, as a modification of my living present, "transcends" my present, the appresented other being "transcends" my own being ...' [CM 115], but this is still a modification of my ego a 'correlate of the intentionality constituting it'.



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to avoid its inclusion within my own egological life as a comprehended, encompassed *moment*.

'The necessary reference to analogical appresentation, far from signifying an analogical and assimilatory reduction of the other to the same, confirms and respects separation, the unsurpassable necessity of (nonobjective) mediation. If I did not approach the other by way of analogical appresentation, if I attained to the other immediately and originally, silently, in communion with the other's own experience, the other would cease to be other.' [VM 154]

Opposed to the complacent assimilation of even the mode of givenness of a thing in space, Husserl analyses the history of its relations through time and its always incomplete *Abschattungen*. The alter ego demonstrates a 'more profound dimension of incompleteness' [VM 155]. It opens a radical impossibility beyond that of perspectival comprehension, but, as Derrida notes, this radicality is a 'double power of indefiniteness'. The radical alterity of the alter ego *depends on its first being a body*. 'The stranger is infinitely other because by his essence no enrichment of his profile can give me the subjective face of his experience *from his perspective*, such as he lived it.' [VM 155] But, the stranger *must* first have a profile. Such an intentional modification of the ego is the only possible point of departure. If the other were entirely in the world, it would not be recognised as alter ego, but if it were not in the world, it could not be recognised at all. Here Derrida reiterates that Husserl does not deduce the alter ego from 'decency' and 'everyday life'<sup>18</sup>.

We might pause here and reflect that this reading of Derrida's runs counter to the one developed in our previous two chapters. As Visker argues, despite this exemplary reading in 'Violence and Metaphysics'<sup>19</sup>, Derrida seems to forget that

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<sup>18</sup> This is summarised by Visker as follows: 'Whereas for Levinas, to appear already means to lose one's absolute alterity (for to appear is to appear *to someone* and hence to be forced to share his categories) and ethics as a consequence had to do with a dimension anterior to the "identifying" light of phenomenology, Derrida contended that "the phenomenon of respect [for the other] supposes the respect of phenomenality" (VM 121). To invert this order of priority, Derrida further contended, was necessarily to leave the realm of an ethics of *originary* finitude and to resort to the gesture of a classical metaphysics of the infinite which would describe the titles of the finite only by comparison. It was the introduction of the very notion of (a) God that Derrida was at pains to avoid.' *Truth and Singularity* p. 280.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 155 fn. 37.



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the 'other is still related to me through shame'<sup>20</sup>. In this regard, the problem of the relation between *l'Autre* and *l'Autrui* seems not to be present in Derrida's analysis<sup>21</sup>. As in Sartre, the correspondence between *autrui-objet* and *autrui-sujet* (experienced in shame) is destined to fail, were it not for the modes of teaching, apology and generosity. Derrida does recognise his failure to address this problem in his essay, but attributes it to a lack in Levinas's original texts: there needs to be a stronger, more detailed analysis of relations between the ego and the other, and between *l'Autre* and *l'Autrui*, but these would have to be eidetic-transcendental descriptions [VM 161] which would put to the test the use of *autrui* in its transformation to proper noun<sup>22</sup>.

Visker writes: 'Levinas's description of the encounter with the Other as 'experience *par excellence*' presupposed an intricate structure of belatedness (*Nachträglichkeit*) in which something that does not *belong* to my time or to the time of the other nonetheless brings them into accordance.'<sup>23</sup> I will argue in the next chapter that the tropes of delay, dehiscence and diachrony are only introduced by Levinas after *Totality and Infinity*. But, that said, it is important to ask whether our reading of the relation between the other as concrete individual and the Other as encounter with master falls prey to Derrida's analysis<sup>24</sup>. Can these modes of production of the infinite produce something absolute in its otherness? That does not appear? '... can one speak of an *experience* of the other or of difference? Has not the concept of experience always been determined by the metaphysics of presence? Is not experience always an encountering of an irreducible presence, the perception of phenomenality?' [VM 190]

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 322.

<sup>21</sup> We might add that Levinas himself does not foreground it as explicitly as he could.

<sup>22</sup> '... there is no concept of the Other. We would have to reflect upon this word "Other" [*Autrui*] in an artisan-like way, in the realm where philosophy and philology constrain each other, uniting their concerns and their rigor – this word "Other" circumscribed in silence by the capital letter which ever increases the neutrality of *other*, and which we use so familiarly, even though it is the very disorder of our conceptuality. Is it a only common noun without concept?' [VM 130]

<sup>23</sup> *Truth and Singularity* p. 322-23

<sup>24</sup> Even if we contest Derrida's reading in some regards, the general case should still be demonstrated: the two, Levinas and Derrida, are operating with fundamentally different conceptions of phenomenology and philosophy.



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The problem can be framed in relation to the legal terminology – *ultra vires*. The phenomenological methodology adopted does not give Levinas the power to justify this move to *absolute* otherness. In postulating a metaphysical underpinning, Levinas reduces phenomenological analysis to quasi-empirical data *to be explained*. What *justifies* this positing of exteriority, what justifies it as *philosophical* discourse?

‘[B]y acknowledging in this infinitely other *as such* (appearing as such) the status of an intentional modification of the ego in general, Husserl gives himself the *right to speak* of the infinitely other as such, accounting for the origin and the legitimacy of his language. He describes the phenomenal system of nonphenomenality. Levinas *in fact* speaks of the infinitely other, but by refusing to acknowledge an intentional modification of the ego – which would be a violent and totalitarian act for him – he deprives himself of the very foundation and possibility of his own language. [VM 155-56]

The general theme persists: Levinas is too quick to speak of the Other so that it, the Other, becomes conflated with the safe ground of the other person or ego. As such, it appears simultaneously as a valorised humanism and metaphysics [VM 178]. It is an excessive or exorbitant moment in *Totality and Infinity*. Even an ‘unphilosophical moment’ in that it seems to be animated by an empiricist (or even common sense) impulse. ‘By radicalising the theme of the infinite exteriority of the other, Levinas thereby assumes the aim which has more or less secretly animated all the philosophical gestures which have been called *empiricisms*.’ [VM 190]

Even though we are familiar with Levinas complaint that ‘humanism is insufficiently human’, and dispute Derrida’s conclusion that the ‘face’ is a metaphor that is dependent on an analogy between God and man and a ‘pre-conceptual, pre-analogical unity of Being’, the interpretation of the face as positive infinite, as exterior, exceeds the *philosophical* protocols developed within his works – it is *Lehre* (the religious tradition, sedimented into our received cultural norms and forms) incorporated into philosophy.

Levinas presents his thoughts as grounded in this phenomenological interpretation of an ‘everyday experience’. For Derrida, it is not that Levinas contradicts himself but that ‘he deprives himself of the very foundation and



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possibility of his own language' [VM 155] since 'one cannot maintain the primacy of the objectifying act [the baseline of phenomenological analysis] and the irreducible originality of nontheoretical consciousness' [VM 107].

That is, this form of philosophical discourse depends on its starting point in finitude and cannot appeal to moments inherited from classical metaphysics, however mediated or transformed. The question bears on the classical relation between the false and the positive infinity<sup>25</sup>. Derrida insists that one cannot maintain the notion of the face and that of *positive infinity* whilst remaining within philosophical discourse [VM 144]. For him, along with Hegel, alterity makes no sense separated from negation [VM 148]. In a footnote to the concluding page of the essay, he cites Hegel's *Science of Logic* to the effect that difference is always related to identity: such that there can be no 'pure' difference and no 'pure' identity [VM 192 fn 91].

Confessing to a 'total deafness' before Levinas's vocabulary of the "Same" and the "Other", Derrida concludes that there must be 'play' of the other in the same, otherwise there would be only the same and the other would never appear as other. Thus the same is never self-same or present to self, even from the beginning. Alterity can be thought only as negativity and '... above all, can be *said* only as negativity, which Levinas begins by refusing' [VM 158]. History is this *economy* of the false infinite which does not congeal into a totality, but is violent and discontinuous.

Levinas will explicitly deal with this question of his use of the positive infinite in *Otherwise than Being*. As it stands in *Totality and Infinity*, it is not clear how an analysis of the encounter in height can be interpreted with *theoretical legitimacy* (rather than speculative legitimation) as an encounter with the positive infinite: that which brings me more than I contain, only exceeds what is currently instantiated – the paradigmatic case of the false infinite. And Levinas is loath to reduce the infinite to a practical idea merely orienting activity within being.

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<sup>25</sup> For Derrida, the false infinite is that beginning in finitude and mortality [VM 143].



## Chapter 3 Derrida's critique of Levinas in "Violence and Metaphysics"

### Empiricism and Philosophical Presentation

The question of language is the central question for Derrida, both in respect of Levinas's theory of language and in the language adopted in the presentation of his themes. Derrida suggests that all the questions he is prompted to raise are questions that relate to language [VM 136]. As we shall see, this trope persists throughout all his writings on Levinas<sup>26</sup>. Developed from his early engagement with Husserl, Derrida will understand *Selbstbesinnung* as a taking responsibility for every element utilised in discourse<sup>27</sup>. This connects him to the Kantian critical tradition which concerns itself with the *authority* of philosophical discourse: what procedures and writing practices warrant assertibility? That is, what protocols distinguish philosophy as personal *Weltanschauung* from Philosophy as critical discipline?

Derrida is emphatic in placing Levinas in a *pre-Kantian* position: *Totality and Infinity* does not even *ask* about responsibility for its discourse [VM 162].

In detailing an experience that exceeds intentional analysis, yet interpreting that breach in terms of a positive infinite and *egoity*, Levinas has exceeded the self-evidence of his method and is thereby unable to justify the manner in which he articulates the Other. 'In making the origin of language, meaning and difference the relation to the infinitely other, Levinas is resigned to betraying his own intentions in his philosophical discourse. The latter is understood, and instructs, only by first permitting the same and Being to circulate within it.' [VM 189] This is exacerbated through recourse to a *classical, metaphysical schema* of dialogue and instruction. The rigour of the descriptions of the break-up of phenomenality is undermined by this suture which brings back elements that phenomenology had been developed to resist [VM 190]. Moreover, without a

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<sup>26</sup> The concern for language, because of its inherent connection to historicity and being will be determining for Derrida's more recent writings on Levinas. For example in 'Force of Law', he refers to the 'difficult questions about Levinas' difficult discourse' [FoL 250] which means that he cannot *borrow* the concept of justice and insists that Levinas has a 'wholly other language' and an 'entirely different discursive procedure' [FoL 256]. See Chapters Five and Six.

<sup>27</sup> Though Derrida understands this project of *Selbstbesinnung* to founder in Husserl's own work on the 'lack of attention paid [by Husserl] to the problem of its own phenomenological enunciation'. 'Punctuations: The Time of a Thesis' [1980] translated by Kathleen McLaughlin in *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 117.



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faithful phenomenological substructure the experience of metaphysical desire cannot defend itself as transcendental (and hence reopens the space for psychologism, etc.)<sup>28</sup>. Derrida notes that 'if one is not convinced by the initial propositions ... one never will be' [VM 117], which means that its logic is that of the anecdote – 'that's my experience, too!' – that or amnesia, where one forgets the manner in which one's experience is framed in pre-given language for which it does not take responsibility<sup>29</sup>.

In contrast, he underscores the necessary mediation of 'ipseity', the *Entausserung* of knowing, the originary, necessary 'violence' of conceptuality<sup>30</sup>.

'No philosophy responsible for its language can renounce ipseity in general, and the philosophy or eschatology<sup>31</sup> of separation may do so less than any other. Between original tragedy and messianic triumph there is *philosophy*, in which violence is returned against violence within knowledge, in which original finitude appears, and in which the other is respected within, and by, the same. This finitude makes its appearance in an irreducibly open question which is the *philosophical question in general*: *why* is the essential, irreducible, absolutely general and unconditioned form of experience as a venturing forth toward the other still egoity? *Why* is an experience which would not be lived as *my own* (for an ego in general, in the eidetic-transcendental sense of these words) impossible and unthinkable? This unthinkable and impossible are the limits of reason in general. In other words: *why finitude* ... ? The philosophy which is the discourse of this reason as phenomenology cannot answer such a question by essence, for every answer can be made only in language, and language is opened by the question. ... Husserl knew this.' [VM 163-64]

The concluding pages of Derrida's essay repeat the earlier ascription of a traditional impulse to Levinas's motivations, that of empiricism:

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<sup>28</sup> In a footnote, Derrida observes that he does not necessarily subscribe to the Husserlian position here, but it does resist Levinas's criticisms [VM 405 fn. 51].

<sup>29</sup> As Sandford also writes: 'These descriptions, assertions without argument, rely for their force on what one might call the phenomenological recognition of the reader.' *Metaphysics of Love* p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> It is not clear to me whether something like a theory of 'transcendental violence' can be attributed to Derrida's work more generally. This rhetoric of violence is developed from out of Levinas's own assertion that all conceptuality is violent. Is Derrida doing more than using this vocabulary to demonstrate that without such 'violence' there is no being or historicity at all? Similar comments could be offered in relation to analogous passages in *Of Grammatology* in response to Lévi-Strauss's ascription of violence to writing [Gramm 101 ff.]. Cf. Hobson's account in OL 30-32 and Beardsworth's general thesis in *Derrida and the Political*.

<sup>31</sup> Derrida emphasises the logos persisting in Levinas's 'eschatology': *l'eschatologie* [VeM 192].



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'It is the *dream* of a purely *heterological* thought at its source. A *pure* thought of *pure* difference. Empiricism is its philosophical name, its metaphysical pretension or modesty. We say the *dream* because it must vanish *at daybreak*, as soon as language awakens.' [VM 189 translation modified]

He notes that the only fault of empiricism is its self-presentation as *philosophy* [VM 189]. Thus Levinas's thought, *la pensée* of the essay's subtitle, is excluded from philosophy by being an empiricism<sup>32</sup>. Even if it raises serious questions, it is a *nonphilosophy* since it is unable to 'justify itself, to come to its own aid in speech' [VM 190]. Which leaves us with the worrying conclusion that Levinas merely *uses* phenomenological results as part of a assemblage that is only superficially philosophical<sup>33</sup>, which, in addition, fails to attend to the problem of metaphoricity. Derrida remarks: 'As Hegel says somewhere, empiricism always forgets, at very least, that it employs the words to be. Empiricism is thinking *by* metaphor without thinking the metaphor *as such*.' [VM 174] Certainly this is a problem for Levinas. Too often to cite, he adds the following phrase to one of his formulations, 'this is not simply a metaphor'. Derrida insists that this problem must be foregrounded in philosophy since it, philosophy, is formed at the conjunction of natural and *technical* languages.

As a concrete example, Derrida examines the use of the term 'exteriority', in particular the central notion of the *non-spatiality* of exteriority and its opposition to the spatiality of the Same [VM 139 ff.]. Levinas has not developed a theory of language and philosophy that would adequately think through this abuse of language. To re-iterate his general theme – this metaphor betrays the necessity of a finite infinite: 'Henceforth, if I cannot designate the (infinite) irreducible

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<sup>32</sup> 'By taking this project to the end, he totally renews empiricism, and inverses it by revealing it to itself as metaphysics.' [VM 190] One might note that here is Levinas's *deconstruction* of empiricism, though one where the results are embraced.

<sup>33</sup> This opposition to empiricism links this essay to two key others. He suggests that etymological empiricism is the hidden root of all empiricism – the thought that philosophy can be circumscribed or reduced to an ideological formation by certain linguistic analyses. A footnote from this passage [VM 173-4] references Benveniste and a possible confrontation with Heidegger (a promise redeemed in 'The Supplement of the Copula'), while the text states that no philology could account for the fundamental gesture of the *cogito*. This opposition to a certain empiricist reduction – 'the very meaning of violence – making possible all straitjackets' – is found in his essay on Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*. 'The Supplement of the Copula: Philosophy before Linguistics' [1971] in *Margins of Philosophy* translated by Alan Bass (Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 175-205. 'Cogito and the History of Madness' [1963] in *Writing and Difference* translated by Alan Bass (London and New York, Routledge, 2001), pp. 36-76.



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alterity of the Other except through the negation of (finite) spatial exteriority, perhaps the meaning of this alterity is finite, is not positively infinite.' [VM 142] Such a metaphors cannot be banned, but its strong claims are consistently undermined<sup>34</sup>.

Howard Caygill insists that Derrida has here traduced Levinas's attention to the problem of metaphor; his metaphors operate as a form of ground-clearing.

'Levinas does not only recognise the dependence of philosophy on rhetoric, but exploits this dependence through disfiguring first metaphor and then the conceptuality that is parasitic upon it. The disfigured metaphors are rhetorical weeds that litter the 'thought' of 'there is' and prepare through their 'ambiguity' for the arrival of an analysis of moods.' [L&P 55]

There is a concern for the materiality of thought-forms that a certain 'pre-philosophical "picture thinking"' can productively displace.

Intriguingly, Derrida appears to anticipate these comments when he makes a brief comparison with Henri Bergson, who, on Derrida's reading<sup>35</sup>, attempted to destroy metaphysical discourse from within, through a method similar to negative theology. Bergson treats language as a historical residue or refuse: it is lost to metaphysics. Hence, the possibility of metaphysical intuition involves a peculiar method: 'Antagonistic metaphors were multiplied systematically in this autodestruction of language which advocated silent metaphysical intuition.' [VM 145] Bergson's speech has given itself 'the right to travel through philosophical discourse as through a foreign medium'. However, Levinas cannot make use of this possibility, because, he, in contrast, takes the possibility of metaphysics to be the possibility of speech: the face to face is constitutive of metaphysical plenitude made possible by language, that is, speaking. It seems that Levinas still writes *as if* his own presentation is immune to this problem, *as if* it had

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<sup>34</sup> 'How to think the other, if the other can be spoken only as exteriority and through exteriority, that is, nonalterity?' [VM 145]

<sup>35</sup> I presume Derrida is here referring to the later work of Bergson, for example, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*: this destruction does not seem to present in a work such as *Matter and Memory*. *Matter and Memory* 5<sup>th</sup> edition [1896, 1908] translated by Nancy Margaret Paul & W. Scott Palmer (New York, Zone Books, 1991). *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* [1932] translated by R. Ashley Avdra & Cloudeley Brereton with the assistance of W. Horsfall Carter (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1977).



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*finally* arrived at the truth, but where metaphors are needed in a pedagogical mode to bring others along with him.

### II

Alongside this threefold critique, Derrida makes a series of comments, often gnomic and fragmentary, regarding an alternative philosophy of *originary finitude*. In the second part of this chapter, I connect those comments to other texts by Derrida in order to gauge their pertinence more generally as speculative programmatic statements. In this endeavour, I run the risk of reducing Derrida's detailed readings to a paraphrase or a summary of results. Our effort will be to open up 'Violence and Metaphysics' so as to insist that the essay is not simply an internal commentary on Levinas. In particular, I will focus on Derrida's "Husserlian Meditations" which dominated his early work. Our main question will be to think his own 'metaphysical' or 'ontological' commitments given Derrida's early aim, expressed in his dissertation on genesis in Husserl, to open phenomenology up to ontology<sup>36</sup>.

#### 'Originary Finitude' and Husserl

Let's begin with the reference to 'archi-factuality' or 'transcendental factuality' [VM 164], Derrida's translation of the Husserlian *Urtatsache*. In transcendental phenomenology, the first *epochē* suspends the question of existence, the second, properly transcendental, *epochē*, reduces what is there presented to meaning-structures (in their noetic and noematic components) of a variously modified intentionality. Access is thereby gained, to transcendental egoity in its significations: 'an opening in which all experience occurs *as such*' [VM 164]. The new science intended by Husserl *describes* these structures in their mode of

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<sup>36</sup> 'It is understandable that Husserl steps back from such consequences. All this signifies nothing less than the collapse of phenomenological transcendental idealism. Phenomenology, the science of self-evidences, given to a theoretical consciousness is methodologically first; but it needs beforehand a whole ontology. It is a moment of the autoconstitution of being, which is synthetically and originally identical to time.' *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy* p. 128. It is this idealism that is Derrida's main object of contestation.



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presentation and alteration<sup>37</sup>. Here, Derrida quotes Husserl: 'For philosophical children this indeed may be the dark corner to which the ghosts of solipsism, or of psychologism or relativism, return. The true philosopher will prefer, instead of fleeing from these ghosts, to illuminate this dark corner.' [VM 164]

These ghosts are dispelled by virtue of the *evidential* weight of the clarified descriptions obtained thereby. As Husserl emphasises, there are two fundamental kinds of *evidence*: 'Original self-evidence [*Ursprungliche Evidenz*] must not be confused with the self-evidence of "axioms" [*der Evidenz der „Axiome“*]; for axioms are in principle already the results of original meaning-construction [*Sinnbildung*] and always have this behind them.' [*Ursprung* 167-68] Logical evidence governs the nomological dimension of science – the interconnection and coherence of its proposition-set. *Originary evidence* is the evidence of perception, intuition and meaning-fulfilment. This distinction governs the entirety of Husserl's work: the 'Origin of Geometry' was written over 40 years after his first published work, *The Philosophy of Arithmetic*, yet returns to the fundamental theme of the 'reactivation of the primordial sense' of the basic elements comprising mathematical ideal unities [*Origin* 28].

In his early writing on Husserl, what subsequently becomes identifiable as deconstruction is first evinced in Derrida's treatment of this *original self-evidence* in its *intuitionism*<sup>38</sup>. This 'archetypical form of evidence', phenomenology's 'principle of all principles', is taken to be the 'presence of the phenomenon itself 'in person'. But in closely examining Husserl's own description of the Living Present of transcendental egoity (the basis for archi-factuality cited in 'Violence and Metaphysics' [VM 165]), Derrida discerns a problem. Not only is the phenomenon in question always temporally inflected, never given in its entirety, but only in "perspectives" or "moments", but the very 'presence' of the 'present' is an internally complex flux. As he writes in his Introduction to 'Origin of Geometry':

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<sup>37</sup> Husserl asserts that: 'The point is not to secure objectivity but to understand it. To deduce is not to explain. ... The only true way to explain is to make transcendently understandable.' [*Crisis* 189]

<sup>38</sup> One of the well-developed themes of Hobson's book is the connection made between Husserl and the developments of intuitionism in mathematics and anti-realism in the work of Dummett.



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'The Living Present has the irreducible originality of a Now [*Maintenant*], the ground of a Here, only if it retains ... the past Now *as such* ... instead of purely and simply succeeding it in an objective time. But this retention will not be possible without a protention which is its very form [*qui en est la forme même*] .... The Absolute of the Living Present, then is nothing other than the indefinite Maintenance [*Maintenant*] of this double enveloping. But this Maintenance itself appears *as such*, it is the *Living Present*, and it has the *phenomenological* sense of a *consciousness* only if the unity of this movement is given as *indefinite* and if its sense of indefiniteness is *announced* [*s'annonce*] in the Present ...' [*Origin* 136-37 *OG* 149-50 translation modified]

Time is presented not as a succession of instants but comprised additionally of retentions (a past-present) and protentions (anticipated future-present): '... only the alterity of past and future permits the absolute identity of the living present as the self-identity of non-self identity.' [*VM* 165] For this flux to become the basis for evidenced descriptions, the flux must be supplemented by a unifying Idea of totality *in the Kantian sense*: '... where the Living Present of consciousness holds itself [*se retient*] as the primordial Absolute only in an indefinite protention, animated and unified by the Idea (*in the Kantian sense*) of the total flux of lived experience [*du flux total du vécu*]' [*Origin* 136 *OG* 148-49].

That is, *sense* can only be explicated *evidentially* in a region *unified by an ego and an Idea* [*Origin* 138 fn 164], but this idea can never itself *be given* 'in person'. There can therefore be no phenomenology of the Idea: it cannot be given in evidence.

'The unity of infinity, the condition for that temporalization, must then be *thought*, since it is announced without appearing and without being contained in a Present. This thought unity, *which makes the phenomenalization of time as such possible*, is therefore always the Idea in the Kantian sense which never phenomenizes itself. ... [Husserl] never directly defined its type of evidence within phenomenology, whose "*principle of all principles*" and archetypal form of evidence are the immediate presence of the thing itself "in person." Implicitly that means: of the phenomenally defined or definable thing, therefore the *finite* thing.' [*Origin* 137-8]

From this perspective Ricoeur (and consequently Derrida) concludes his comparative essay on Kant and Husserl with the thought that phenomenology cannot be grounded in or ground itself – it must indicate its own limits and



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depend upon an *interpretation*<sup>39</sup>. There is hence no phenomenology of phenomenology.

Derrida's central critique of Husserl draws all its force from this move from the flux of the Living Present to the Transcendental Ego, where the latter is the domain for evidential sense-explication<sup>40</sup>. If its descriptions are governed by infinite ideas and anticipations that cannot be validated from within, phenomenology's claim to apodictic scientificity is put into question<sup>41</sup>.

#### Origin, Telos and Undecidability

The analysis that reveals the alterity at the heart of the Living Present in its very temporalization is further troubled by the alterity of the plurality of alter egos *and alter cultures* also structuring the transcendental field. The arguments offered by Husserl, for example, in 'Origin of Geometry', to control this potential proliferation of Living Presents involve attempting to demonstrate a *universal, general Einfühlung* underlying the perception of space by all rational creatures (a common *origin*) and a *teleological interpretation of history* as the progressive production of ideal structures from that starting point<sup>42</sup>.

Derrida is unable to share either of these conclusions. In his dissertation, he rejects Husserl's teleology of civilisations with a cursory gesture: 'Does the establishing of philosophy divide humanity in its geographical and historical

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<sup>39</sup> Ricoeur 'Kant and Husserl' [1954] in *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology* edited and translated by Edward G. Ballard & Lester E. Embree (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1967), pp. 175-201.

<sup>40</sup> '[Husserl's] uneasiness stems from the fact that he is trying to retain two apparently irreconcilable possibilities: (a) The living now is constituted as the absolute perceptual source only in a state of continuity with retention taken as nonperception. Fidelity to experience and to "the things themselves" forbids that it be otherwise. (b) The source of certitude in general is the primordial character of the living now; it is necessary therefore to keep retention in the sphere of primordial certitude and to shift the frontier between the primordial and the nonprimordial.' [SP 67]

<sup>41</sup> Hobson sees Derrida's contribution as 'foregrounding the intervention of the infinite' in three key points of Husserl's argument with respect to: time, relations to other, and language [OL 9].

<sup>42</sup> This account is presented in Appendix A. Here *Einfühlung* has a broader sense than empathy (and certainly a broader sense than Levinas's persistent understanding of it as 'sympathy'). Literally transcribing it as 'one-feeling' would capture the *intersubjective*, transcendental *limit* sought by Husserl. Cf. Wittgenstein's understanding of the subject as the limit of the world. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* § 5.632 p. 151.



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extension into two families, of which one would be limited to an empirical group, comprising on the one hand the Europeans who preceded the spiritual advent of Europe, on the other hand, the non-Europeans? This hypothesis is laughable.'<sup>43</sup>

Sidelining the establishment of a general *Einführung*, Derrida attends to the crucial notion of *proto-idealization*. In marking out the point before geometry becomes an *ideal* science of axiomatics, proto-idealizations are formed from pre-geometrical experience but become the stable bases for calculations and deductions: they are liminal, with no *clear separation* of *eidos* and world. Ideality is accomplished when these elements are no longer dependent on reality, but become the first materials for future formations (*Bildung*)<sup>44</sup>. Derrida notes that there is a 'profound area where 'sense is indissociable from being: where the *de facto* is indissociable from the *de jure*' (*Origin* 46). However, he argues that, since these proto-idealizations are only accessed by a methodology of *Rückfrage*, questioning back from the *constituted* to the *constitutive* acts, the sense of the constituting acts will always be retrospectively determined by the subsequent structure developed<sup>45</sup>. Rather than stressing a pre-geometrical universal structure

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<sup>43</sup> *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy* p. 157. In 'Structure, Sign and Play', Derrida understands ethnology to have 'forced' Europe 'to stop considering itself as the culture of reference'. 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' [1968] translated by Alan Bass in *Writing and Difference* (London & New York, Routledge, 2001), pp. 351-370, p. 356. Yet since these earlier references, Derrida has returned repeatedly to this question of Europe and Europe as idea. Most explicitly, *The Other Heading* asks what if Europe were '... the opening onto a history for which the changing of the heading, the relation to the other heading or to the other of the heading, is experienced as always possible?' Europe with its de-colonial structuring and memory of its internecine wars has perhaps a privilege and responsibility to advance *non-exclusion*. *The Other Heading: Reflection on Today's Europe* [1991] translated by Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael B. Naas (Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 17. (See also the discussion of Valéry in the former and also *Specters of Marx* pp. 5-6.) This theme is repeated over ten years later in 'The "World" of the Enlightenment to Come' where, though resisting the idea of Reason as European [*Rogues* 119] he writes: 'The invention of these maxims resembles the poetic invention of an idiom whose singularity would not yield to any nationalism, not even a European nationalism – even if, as I would like to believe, within today's geopolitical landscape, a new thinking and a previously unencountered destination of Europe, along with another responsibility for Europe, are being called to give a new chance to this idiom. Beyond all Eurocentrism.' [*Rogues* 158]. Again, in more determinate form, an interview from 2004, calls for a Europe to position itself against 'American Hegemony' and an 'Arab-Islamic theocracy without Enlightenment' [my italics] – Europe is something more than 'a crime scene'. Jacques Derrida & Jean Birnbaum 'I am at war with myself' in *Le Monde* (Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> August, 2004) translated by Pascale Fusshoeller, Leslie Thatcher and Steve Weissman.

<sup>44</sup> Hobson: '... the emergence of the mathematical object is the emergence of objectivity and the conditions of its logical availability are the conditions of its historical constitution' [*OL* 182].

<sup>45</sup> Derrida: '... the reactivating reduction supposes the iterative reduction of the static and structural analysis, which teaches us once and for all what the geometrical "phenomenon" is and



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of subjectivity underlying this scientific accomplishment, Derrida points to the *break* between the two orders of the geometrical and the pre-geometrical, where the sense of the former is in no way dependent upon the sense of that from which it originates<sup>46</sup>. Geometrical idealities sprang from pre-geometrical experience. "Sprang" in the sense that we will see dominate Derrida's later analyses of the incalculable and event. The event or decision arrives in such a way that it is not anticipated – it belongs to an entirely *other* order.

Derrida understands this more radical independence to be the secret cargo of what he takes to be Husserl's unprecedented move: granting writing the central place in the constitution of geometry's ideal independence from subjectivity<sup>47</sup>. It is only with writing that the ideal *objectality*<sup>48</sup> gains persistent being, a quasi-independence from living, awake subjects<sup>49</sup>. Writing appears as an amanuensis to ideality that ensures the *perdurance* of sense and frees it from its ties to the empirical, *subjective* event of its production in an individual ego. But this autonomy of the constituted in writing delivers it from its conditions of origination.

'From then on, writing is no longer only the worldly and mnemotechnical aid to a truth whose own being-sense would dispense with all writing-down

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when its possibility is constituted [*qui nous apprend ce qu'est une fois pour toutes le «phénomène» géométrie, lorsque sa possibilité est constituée*].' [*Origin* 50, OG 35]

<sup>46</sup> 'How will preobjective time recognize itself in objective time after its constitution in a phenomenological time?' *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy* p. 68.

<sup>47</sup> 'Punctuations: The Time of a Thesis' pp. 117-18.

<sup>48</sup> I use 'objectality' to translate the German *Gegenständlichkeit* and the French *objectité*, in order to differentiate it from the English 'objectivity' used to translate *Objektivität* and *objectivité*. The current convention of rendering one by 'Objectivity' and the other by 'objectivity' is confusing and inaccurate. An 'objectality' is a countable, ideal state of affairs, but not necessarily an object – it is a correlate of meaning-structures. 'I often make use of the vaguer expression, *Gegenständlichkeit*, since we are here never limited to objects in the narrower sense, but have also to do with states of affairs [*Sachverhalte*], properties, and non-independent forms etc., whether real or categorial.' Husserl *Logical Investigations* p. 281. '[A]n expression only refers to an objective correlate [*Gegenständlichkeit*] because it means something, it can be rightly said to signify or name the object *through* its meaning. An act of meaning is the determinate manner in which we refer to our object of the moment, though this mode of significant reference and the meaning itself can change while the objective reference remains fixed.' [ibid. p. 289]

<sup>49</sup> '... the objectivity of the ideal structure has not yet been fully constituted through such actual transferring of what has been originally produced in one to others who originarily reproduce it. What is lacking is the *persisting existence* [*verharrende Dasein*] of the "ideal objectalities" ... what is lacking is their continuing-to-be even [*Immerfort-Sein*] when no one has [consciously] realized them in self-evidence.' [*Ursprung* 164 translation modified]



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[*dont le sens d'être se passerait en lui-même de toute consignation*]. The possibility or necessity of being incarnated in a graphic sign [*dans une graphie*] is no longer simply extrinsic and factual in comparison with ideal Objectivity [*l'objectivité*]: it is the *sine qua non* condition of Objectivity's internal completion [*de son achèvement interne*]. As long as ideal Objectivity is not, or rather, *can not* be engraved [*gravée*] in the world ... then ideal Objectivity is not fully constituted.' [*Origin* 88-89, *OG* 86]

As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, Levinas understands this autonomy of the sign as a passivity no longer animated by subjective intention that, in justice, must be reanimated in apology. *Reactivation* [*Reaktivierung*] in Husserl traverses the sedimented cultural structures<sup>50</sup> to re-find the original constituting acts that connect the science of geometry back to the Lifeworld; in this way, *validity* is ensured<sup>51</sup>. But Derrida argues that the radical autonomy of the inscribed means that it no longer can be governed by such an appeal to origin. Historicity of the first event can only appear *afterwards* as the origin of a tradition given to me<sup>52</sup>. The sense of the originary event is *nothing in itself without the subsequent formation into tradition*.

Derrida highlights the possible impact of Gödel (*Origin* 53 ff.). The ideal of exhaustive deductivity of an axiomatic system was undermined by the presentation on the undecidable properties of closed, logical structures. For any consistent system, able to encompass arithmetic, there will be at least one

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<sup>50</sup> See Derrida's essay, 'Form and Meaning' for a discussion of the metaphors of sedimentation and stratification in Husserl. 'Form and Meaning: A Note on the Phenomenology of Language' [1967] translated by Alan Bass in *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 155-173.

<sup>51</sup> '... out of sentences with sedimented signification, logical "dealing" can produce only other sentences of the same character. That all new acquisitions express an actual geometrical truth is certain a priori under the presupposition that the foundations of the deductive structure have truly been produced and objectified in original self-evidence, i.e., have become universally accessible acquisitions. ... Only as long as this condition was satisfied, or only when the possibility of its fulfillment was perfectly secured for all time, could geometry preserve its genuine, original meaning as a deductive science throughout the progression of logical constructions. ... The progress of deduction follows formal-logical self-evidence; but without the actually developed capacity for reactivating the original activities contained within its fundamental concepts, i.e., without the "what" and the "how" of its prescientific materials, geometry would be a tradition empty of meaning ....' [*Ursprung* 169] That is, geometry would be a cultural formation and not a *valid* science.

<sup>52</sup> Hobson takes the reactivation of *Rückfrage* as the means of responsiveness to the other [*OL* 182].



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sentence which is true on the standard interpretation but which is not provable from within the system itself<sup>53</sup>.

A very useful summary is provided by Paolo Zellini:

'In 1931, Gödel showed that mathematics kept on revealing *openings*, or references to something *other* than what could be expressed by a formal system like Hilbert's. In other words, symbolic mathematics was not able – as formalism had promised – to express a closed and exhaustive world of signs, a *complete* formal system.

'For any (sufficiently powerful) formal system of mathematics, Gödel indicated two inevitable consequences. (1) There exist relatively elementary and intuitively true propositions which cannot be deduced in the formalism of the system. (2) The statement that expresses the coherence of the system cannot itself be deduced within its own formalism, in the sense that an attempt at deduction would lead to the absurdity of a relation such that  $1 \neq 1$ . ... Gödel's proof could well be considered the contribution of genius to the art of paradox, revealing the incomparable value of *impossibility*, of an *obstacle*, as a vehicle for understanding the *absence* of the infinite-as-totality in this world ... the absurdity of an explicit revelation of the infinite in the ranks of ordinary appearance ....'<sup>54</sup>

From the point of view of our analysis, the proto-idealization assumes added importance as the 'relatively elementary and intuitively true propositions' which would be *validated* not by the consistency of the resulting system but in *original evidence*, by the connection to the *Lebenswelt* and hence would overcome undecidability. This would explicitly (and not uncontroversially) align Husserl with an attempt to *respond to Gödel* in these texts written in the mid-1930's, a few years after the latter's paper on undecidability. But Derrida's undermining of the basic structure of originary evidence means that the evidences prior to the axiomatics of geometry (a *secondary grounding*) could never close down the problem of validity *without a completed telos* that could, *pace* Gödel, never be complete. Axiomatics supposes a sedimentation of sense upon an originary *Sinnbildung*, but this originary act is retroactively prey to *whatever future forms develop*.

'The sense of the constituting act can only be deciphered in the web of the constituted object [*la trame de l'objet constitué*]. And this necessity is not

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<sup>53</sup> Kurt Gödel *On Formally Undecidable Propositions of Principia Mathematica and Related Systems* [1931] translated by B. Meltzer (New York, Dover Publications, 1992)

<sup>54</sup> Paolo Zellini *A Brief History of Infinity* [1980] translated by David Marsh (London, Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 177-8.



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an external fate, but an essential necessity of intentionality. The *primordial* sense of every intentional act is *only* its *final* sense, i.e., the constitution of an object (in the broadest sense of these terms). That is why only a teleology can open up a passage, a way back toward beginnings [*C'est pourquoi seule une téléologie peut s'ouvrir un passage vers les commencements*].' [Origin 64 OG 53-54]

So we see, for Derrida, the supplementary arguments regarding the origin and the telos are crucial to maintaining the *scientificity* of Husserlian phenomenology. The origin cannot do without a telos, and vice versa: 'The phenomenological attitude is first an availability of attention for the future of a truth which is always already announced.' [Origin 148] The whole Husserlian problematic of validity is challenged.

While Husserl might believe that such a method can shore up geometry against a primordial or original sense, and so reach evidential certainty, Derrida insists that there is no end or origin for such sense-investigation. Undecidability for Derrida, as influenced by Gödel, means that a telos is never completable and that the origin can never determine definitively the meaning of a formation, 'whose unity is always *to come* [à venir] on the basis of what is announced in the origin' [Origin 53]: future developments render its meaning open to change. Under the term, *traditionality* Derrida insists instead on an endless circulation *between being and sense* as the structure of the transcendental field (which is no longer an *ego* in the monadic sense of Husserl and may tend towards Jean Hyppolite's idea of a *subjectless transcendental field of writing* [Origin 88, OG 84]<sup>55</sup>).

It is important to emphasise three points here regarding *undecidability*.

1. If '... the notion of the un-decidable [*in-décidable*] ... retains a mathematical value from some unique source of value vaster than the project of *definiteness* itself' [Origin 53 OG 39]<sup>56</sup>, if ideas are employed

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<sup>55</sup> In relation to Hobson's discussion of transcendentalism and ideality [OL p. 219 ff.], I believe Husserl differentiates the ideal structure of cultural sedimentation – which gains objectivity (or independence from subjectivity) through writing – from the *transcendentalism* that is alone able to guarantee the univocity of sense-intention and hence enable evidential fulfilment in intuition and provide a foundation for valid science by determining the general scope of a particular ideality.

<sup>56</sup> This idea of a reserved "space" will re-appear in his meditations on the *khôra*. E.g., 'The democracy to come would be like the *khôra* of the political.' [Rogues 82]



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to curtail the limits of this indefiniteness, then in *making explicit* the *inability* of phenomenology to close down transcendentalty, deconstruction would be more *theoretical* than Husserlian phenomenology. It would therefore reject the practical decision to orientation in Levinas and Husserl as *unphilosophical, as betraying the phenomenological aim*.

2. Transcendentalty, in being unable to delimit itself, must open itself up. To what? In the dissertation, Derrida talked of a "dialectic" between phenomenology and ontology (meant in a non-Heideggerian sense). I hazard the idea that this is the place for thinking the relation between phenomenology and grammatology. Importantly, such an idea would displace the reading which situates Derrida in a phenomenological camp *opposed to a structuralist one* as if the theoretical terrain only comprised two discrete positions<sup>57</sup>. If transcendentalty is not enclosed, or more importantly self-enclosing, then it cannot close off the *empirical* (the non-transcendental) in any clear manner. Hence the later employment of the term 'quasi-transcendental'<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>57</sup> 'It is already clear that Derrida is employing Husserlian phenomenology as a foil for engaging in a critique of structuralism and the closure that the idea of structure implies. ... Derrida's approach to the problem of genesis and structure employs the resources of Husserlian phenomenology in an uncritical and sympathetic way in order to focus ultimately on 'un problème de *cloture* ou d'*ouverture*' ... which displaces both geneticism and structuralism.' [ED 63] This suggestion is attributed by Critchley to Peter Dews's *Logics of Disintegration*. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to a philosophical engagement with Derrida has been this positioning of him as phenomenological without appreciating the consequences of undermining the Husserlian 'principle of all principles'. Peter Dews *Logics of Disintegration: PostStructuralist Thought and the Claims for Critical Theory* (London & New York, Verso, 1987).

<sup>58</sup> Hobson cites Blanchot's observation that phenomenology was '*carried over into structuralism*' insofar as the human was assimilated as a formalized set of operations [OL 7] and then develops this idea by suggesting that *de-con-struction* should be understood as being formed in the different directions of the 'double prefixes' ('de' and the 'con'), in relation to structuralism [OL 16]. In 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', Derrida describes deconstruction as being forged within the dominance of structuralism. Deconstruction is understood there as a 'gesture' both anti-structuralist and *in need of* 'the structuralistic problematic'. It is in the genealogical adoption of the *Rückfrage*, that deconstruction is 'more historical' than structuralism. 'Letter to a Japanese Friend' [1983] in *Derrida and Différance*; Edited by David Wood & Robert Bernasconi (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 1-5. See also Jacques Derrida 'Force and Signification' translated by Alan Bass in *Writing and Difference* [1967] (London & New York, Routledge, 2001); pp. 1-35, p. 32.



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3. Without the evocation of ideas in this way, their function of unifying consciousness and discourse is absent. The throws up a problem of intelligibility – deconstruction cannot ground its own presentation in any classical manner.

This displacement does not however overthrow the importance of archi-factuality. The descriptive sciences, whether historicist or objectivist, suffer from an 'empiricist cult of fact and causalist presumption'. The originary investigation of idealities, their initial production and their institutional developments as culture, cannot simply be treated as facts<sup>59</sup>. Nor as ideal and supertemporal (*überzeitlich*) are they ahistorical – since they both develop over time, and gain their validity from a first originary connection (production) to the lifeworld. Derrida notes that a 'new scheme is created': '... on the one hand, it brings to light a new type of profundity or historicity; on the other hand, and correlatively, it determines the new tools and original direction of historical reflection' [*Origin* 26; *OG* 4]. Though opened up to the empirical in a manner different from Husserl, Derrida still attends to the *institution* of ideal structures and identifies the *uniqueness* of inaugurating facts in history. But this 'Factuality' does not spring from one single, common origin, nor does the origin dominate subsequent history.

For Husserl, this illuminates the intersubjective constitution of subjectivity. For Derrida, it is the leap from non-ideality to ideality that interests him. This strong notion of the event is tied to a theoretical fidelity to the essence-analyses of static phenomenology. Such "events", as unique, constitutive facts form the presuppositions of empirical scientific discourses. Phenomenology concerns itself with the *scientificity* of such discourses, through the determination of their a priori Factuality<sup>60</sup>. The 'philosophical nonsense' of empiricism or rationalism would consist in not seeing this transcendental structure of Factuality; the fact

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<sup>59</sup> In this respect, Hobson identifies the doubled nature of Derrida's relation to Husserl: not to repeat his work, but neither to lose his rigour in its opposition to empiricism, historicism and psychologism [*OL* 9].

<sup>60</sup> '[Historical phenomenology] simply *de jure* precedes every material historical investigation and has no need of facts as such to reveal to the historian the apriori sense of his activity and objects' [*Origin* 112].



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itself cannot account for its relation to sense. Derrida's aberrant phenomenology would still position itself as first science despite its ragged, opened-up refiguring of transcendental<sup>61</sup>.

This complex analysis underlies the references to 'several origins of the world in general' [VM 161]. The impossibility of evidential origination of any grounding sense repositions the structuring of consciousness by other intersubjectivities. I can no longer begin from my own sense:

'The discursive and dialectical intersubjectivity of Time with itself in the infinite multiplicity and infinite implication of its absolute *origins* entitles every other intersubjectivity in general to exist and makes the polemical unity of appearing and disappearing irreducible. Here delay is the philosophical absolute, because the beginning of methodic reflection can only consist in the consciousness of the implication of *another* previous, possible, and absolute origin in general.' [Origin 152, my italics]

The problem thus generated radically exceeds the problem of alterity as found in both Husserl and Levinas. Alterity is the 'sign ... that one may no longer draw inspiration from within the coherence of the *Logos*', but this does not warrant the move to a religious inspiration that still remains an eschato-*logy* beholden to classical metaphysics and the "dogmatic" surety of first person speech. 'This origin is an inscribed inscription.' [VM 159]

The above summary, compressed and violent, only seeks to insist upon the distance thus generated between Levinas's understanding of phenomenology and Derrida's work. We should note that the attention to the event, the relation between constituted and constituting are persistent themes in the later work on ethics, politics and law. We have here *in nuce* the third aporia of the decision from 'Force of Law': justice only appears as madness *from within* an economy of exchange [FL 257] and the insistence on the dimension of *avenir* in the *futur(e)*. For something to arrive, for something to happen, means precisely that it cannot be anticipated or prefigured. The resonances generated between these statements

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<sup>61</sup> '... since the singularities of origins are those of instituting acts [*actes fondateurs*] of every ideal signification and, in particular of the possibilities of science and of philosophy, then their history is the most independent, the most concrete, and the first of sciences.' [Origin 49] [OG 33-34]



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and the paradigmatic examples of the works written during the 'ethico-political turn' suggest that this break cannot be marked by a jettisoning of Derrida's technical, 'grammatological grid'. We will see the notions of responsibility, decision and, in particular, *propaedeutic* in subsequent sections of this chapter. But we now turn to the 'ontological' implications of this rethinking of transcendentalism.

### Historicity and Being

It is much neglected, but one should note that Derrida's comments on history and historicity are most explicit in 'Violence and Metaphysics'. This is not accidental. It is partly to do with the opposition to Levinas systematics, but also to do with a decision to drop the term "history" or rather not to persist with the 'old name' after the transformations detailed below.

Derrida sides with original finitude over and against Levinas's understanding of the human as the site of the production of a *positive infinity*. He appears to sympathise with Levinas in the attempt to escape from 'envelopment' by Hegel but argues this cannot be done under the prophetic gesture towards the 'absolute other'. It has to be done, as Husserl might be understood to do, by attending to the irreducibility of intentional *incompleteness* and the *alterity* of other origins, '... and by showing that since [intentional] consciousness is irreducible, it can never possibly, by its own essence, become self-conscious, nor be reassembled absolutely close to itself in the parousia of an absolute knowledge' [VM 149].

Peter Osborne is one of the few to have commented on the evocation of essential finitude in this essay [VM 163-4].

'Is it true as Derrida maintains, that 'the only effective position to take in order not to be enveloped by Hegel' is to 'consider the false-infinity ... irreducible' [VM 149]? Is there not a disjunction, in fact, between the original finitude and the false-infinity – that is to say, between Heidegger



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and Kant? Does the experience associated with Heidegger's existentialism really reduce to Kant's? It seems unlikely.'<sup>62</sup>

I concur with Osborne's doubts over such a conflation. But it seems that this gesture on the part of Derrida is already hedged with doubts; in some ways, these terms serve as placeholders merely marking an opposition to Levinas's endeavour. We will turn shortly to the attempt to understand history in its relation to infinity, as distinct from Kant's discussion of reason's antinomies regarding the world's finitude or infinitude. However, Derrida's discussion of Heidegger from '*Ousia* and *Grammē*' is worth consideration here<sup>63</sup>.

Describing *Being and Time* as a 'decisive step beyond or within metaphysics', he notes that it 'brings to light the omission which permitted metaphysics to believe that it could think time on the basis of a being already silently predetermined in its relation to time' [*Ousia* 47]. But this 'making explicit' still 'remains with metaphysics' [*Ousia* 48] to the extent that it is still 'governed' by Aristotelian concepts [*Ousia* 61]<sup>64</sup>. Moreover, this metaphysics assumes a more dominant role in Heidegger's conceptualisation of authenticity and the distinction between primordial and fallen temporality. Derrida asks: 'why determine as *fall* the passage from one temporality to another?' [*Ousia* 63] Crucially for distinguishing his finitude from Heidegger's, he highlights in a footnote the metaphysical decision to ask the 'question of the meaning of Being on the basis of *Dasein*' [*Ousia* 64 fn. 39]. Here we see Derrida's opposition to existential analysis: the breach of transcendental egoity renders the decision to focus on *Dasein* question-begging and lies in contrast to a move towards a subjectless

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<sup>62</sup> Osborne *The Politics of Time* p. 122. Marrati argues convincingly that Derrida's project 'has never been the Heideggerian project of originary finitude' [*Genesis and Trace* p. 184], but does not note that Derrida had given the phrase such a central place in 'Violence and Metaphysics'.

<sup>63</sup> Jacques Derrida '*Ousia* and *Grammē*: Note on a Note from *Being and Time*' [1968] translated by Alan Bass in *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 29-67. Hereafter abbreviated to *Ousia* followed by page reference.

<sup>64</sup> Hobson's summary of this 'dominance' is worth citing: '... a more powerful philosophical trend has privileged the 'now', and thus time as presence and predication as a punctual point of synthesis between subject and object. The effect is to constitute intellectual entities in the sense of turning them into ob-jects, objectifying them, making of them already given objects of which something can be predicated, instead of working with our modes of apprehending them.' [*OL* 118]



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field of investigation<sup>65</sup>. Again, we might see the practical orientation of authenticity in resolute anticipation as gearing the philosophy to what still might be cast as a world-outlook<sup>66</sup>. For Derrida, philosophy will not be determined at this level of what still remains the first-person orbit of a being<sup>67</sup>: the 'co-belonging' of being and 'man' (governed by self-presence) is what Derrida believes to be at issue in deconstruction<sup>68</sup>. This 'fundamental ontology' is insufficiently "ontological" in opening up to the empirical.

In a long footnote to the much later essay, 'The "World" of the Enlightenment to Come' (2002), Derrida attempts to clarify his relation to Heidegger by making four points [*Rogues* pp. 173-5 fn. 14]:

1. Heidegger's *Destruktion* of the history of metaphysics did not oppose *logos* – it claimed to offer a 'more originary reinterpretation' of it.
2. Deconstruction does not present itself as 'diagnosis' as if it were able to circumscribe 'something called Metaphysics'; deconstruction 'is

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<sup>65</sup> Marrati: 'It is this logic of presupposition (*Voraussetzung*) that allows the boundaries of the existential analytic to be delimited, a logic whose legitimacy and force Derrida wants to follow right up to the point at which the rigor of any such delimitation vacillates.' *Genesis and Trace* p. 156.

<sup>66</sup> Marrati reads Derrida's opposition to Heidegger's privileging of anticipation and protention as fidelity to the Husserlian analysis of the *passivity of time* [ibid. pp. 125-27]. 'I have tried to describe the opposition that separates an anachronic temporality thought by way of the trace [Derrida] from a temporality the finitude of which falls under the sign of the originary [Heidegger], a finitude that appears as the impossibility of either origin or end from a finitude that, on the basis of a possibility of the end, refers back to the origin.' [ibid. p. 138] Compare the following passage from Derrida's dissertation: '... Husserl refused to recognize that any point of departure for philosophy and for sense is an *a priori* synthesis whose absolute evidence refers to an indefinite that is irreducible; this was to refuse to cause philosophy to be born into an existence whose finitude was apparent to itself.' *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy* p. 5.

<sup>67</sup> Again Marrati identifies the decision to start with *Dasein* as determining since by starting with a being 'that can itself testify', Heidegger proceeds to give present to the related terms: *proper* (or 'ownmost' [*eigen*] and *authenticity* [*Eigentlichkeit*]). It is the 'very choice that generates every evaluation and every possible hierarchy' [op. cit. p. 165] with the result that, for Derrida, Heidegger 'insufficiently disrupts this horizon of the originary and the proper that is the first target of any thought of the trace as temporalization, as spacing, as alteration' [ibid. 184].

<sup>68</sup> Derrida 'The Ends of Man' pp. 133-34. Here the horizon of metaphysics is glossed at the horizon of the 'Indo-European linguistic milieu', though Derrida admits he should not pretend to know what this means [ibid. p. 125], though it will connect with *Of Grammatology's* claim to see 'logocentrism' as the metaphysics of Western *phonetic* writing [*Gramm* 90]. Derrida treats Hegel's championing of Western phonetic writing in 'The Pit and the Pyramid'. 'The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel's Semiology' [1971] translated by Alan Bass in *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 69-108.



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inscribed, undertaken and understood in the very element of the language it calls into question' [*Rogues* 174].

3. Deconstruction does not 'desediment' tradition to return to a dissembled originary, authentic meaning.
4. Deconstruction puts the question in question: 'Deconstruction does not seek to discredit critique; it in fact constantly relegitimizes its necessity and heritage, even though it never renounces either a genealogy of the critical idea or a history of the question and of the supposed privilege of interrogative thought.' [ibid. p. 175]

Derrida concludes 'Ousia and Grammē' by noting the change of horizons involved in shifting to the *epochality of Being*: the horizon of this question is no longer framed by *Dasein*, finitude or historicity [*Ousia* 64]<sup>69</sup>. We should note that Derrida himself withdraws from this thematics of fundamental ontology in 'Violence and Metaphysics'. That this is done mostly in the footnotes to the essay is perhaps not without significance. One note specifically nods to the function of a placeholding that is not yet a paleonymy<sup>70</sup>.

'... "ontology" does not refer to the concept of ontology which Heidegger proposes to renounce ... but to the unfindable expression by which it must be replaced. The word "historical" also must be modified in order to be understood in consonance with the word "ontological" of which it is not an attribute, and in relation to which it marks no derivation.' [VM 410 fn. 87]

Elsewhere the reference to history is described as merely 'contextual'<sup>71</sup>. Derrida seems to think that it cannot be removed from its traditional reference to teleology and eschatology and if it is no longer tied to presence it cannot operate philosophically as before [VM 186-8]. That is, without the guiding telos,

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<sup>69</sup> That is not to say that Derrida is convinced by the thought of epochality in Heidegger, just that it represents a different problematic. See 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> 'Why should an old name, for a determinate time, be retained? Why should the effects of a new meaning, concept, or object be damped by memory? ... one of the terms retains its old name so as to destroy the opposition to which it no longer quite belongs, to which in *any* event it has never quite yielded, the history of this opposition being one of incessant struggles generative of hierarchical configurations ...' [*Dissemination* 3-4]

<sup>71</sup> 'There is no such thing as a "metaphysical-concept." There is no such thing as a "metaphysical-name." The "metaphysical" is a certain determination or direction taken by a sequence or "chain." It cannot as such be opposed by a concept but rather by a process of textual labour and a different sort of articulation.' [*Dissemination* 6]



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religious idea or 'firm direction of the will' it is unclear what the concept of history signifies. In consequence, Derrida suggests removing all reference to the finite and the infinite [VM p. 407 fn. 70].

The abandoning of the terms 'finitude' and 'infinity' relate to an attempt to escape from the thinking of such terms under the kind of rubric found in Kant's first antinomy. Here the thesis presents a world beginning in time and limited with respect to space, while the antithesis has the world as infinite in time and space<sup>72</sup>. The *critical* synthesis of this dialectical impasse is to insist that the world is not given as an object in magnitude, but only constructed in the course of a 'regress' from appearance to appearance. The regress is determined as *indefinite*, without end, in proceeding towards, but never attaining, either a limit or an absolute totality incorporating the *unconditioned*.

'[The world] exists only in the empirical regress of the series of appearances, and is not to be met with as something in itself. If, then, this series is always conditioned, and therefore can never be given as complete, the world is not an unconditioned whole, and does not exist as such a whole, either of infinite or of finite magnitude.'<sup>73</sup>

This would seem to chime with Derrida's description of the system as a structural totality:

'[Levinas's reading of Husserl] presupposes, once more, that the totality is finite (a supposition in no way inscribed in its concept), that history as such can be a finite totality, and that there is no history beyond the finite totality. Perhaps one would have to show, as was suggested above, that history is impossible, meaningless, in the finite totality, and that it is impossible, meaningless, in the positive and actual infinity; that history keeps to the difference between totality and infinity, and that history precisely is that which Levinas calls transcendence and eschatology. A system is neither finite nor infinite. A structural totality escapes this alternative in its functioning. It escapes the archaeological and the eschatological, and inscribes them in itself.' [VM 153]

In this regard, we should note three crucial differences from Kant regarding Derrida's 'turn' to the indefinite: these relate to the function of the

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<sup>72</sup> *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* [1781, 1787] translated by Norman Kemp Smith 2<sup>nd</sup> impression (Basingstoke & London, MacMillan, 1933), [A 426 / B 454] p. 396.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. A 505 / B 533 p. 448.



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unconditioned, unity and the *series* in this understanding of knowledge and the ideas of theoretical reason. For Kant, human reason is architectonic requiring *unity* in knowledge. Although the ideas have no *transcendent* role (the notion of an indefinite world in its series of conditions cannot be present in an object of experience), in their regulative role governing and directing the synthesis of the understanding they are *constitutive of the possibility of experience as such*. The ideas are 'ultimate ends toward which all the endeavours of reason must converge'<sup>74</sup> in that they outline the prescribed *completeness of determination of the object conditioned*<sup>75</sup>.

As Kant stresses, the unconditioned must be thought to bring *unity* and *consistency* to the understanding by uniting all acts into a whole. The three inferences carried out on the basis of the categorial, hypothetical and disjunctive syntheses point to the *unity* of the thinking subject, the *unity* of the world (as series for appearances), and the *unity* of the conditions of objects of thought in general. The role of the ideas is necessary in giving direction to the understanding with regard to this totality<sup>76</sup>; that is, the very production of the synthesis depends on these ideas and hence all experience is subordinated to the unconditioned; the unconditioned orients the synthesis of the conditioned. Importantly, the regulative rule for the task of extending experience and correcting knowledge is described by Kant as '*doctrinal*'<sup>77</sup> in that it determines empirical use of understanding 'as if it were an axiom which determined *a priori* the objects in themselves'<sup>78</sup>. In setting the idea as a problem, reason guides the understanding, *bringing about the concept it contains*. This is understood as a *progress from conditioned to unconditioned*<sup>79</sup>.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. A 463 / B 491 p. 422.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. A 508 / B 537 p. 450.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. A 326 / B 383 p. 318.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. A 516 / B 544 p. 454.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. A 517 / B 545 p. 455.

<sup>79</sup> In 'The Ends of Man', a footnote on Kant marks the classical structure of this situation: the human is finite but is distinguished from animality by virtue of being able to think the unconditioned – thus this is the very definition of the 'eschato-teleological situation' [op. cit. pp. 121-22].



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Although Derrida supports an indefinite, extensional negation of the finite given, Derrida's 'false-infinity' is not framed by the search for an *archia* or unconditioned [VM 176-77]. Even the transcendental is opened to the conditioned on Derrida's analysis. The problem of intelligibility will be to the fore in a history without telos, but there is no place for progress here<sup>80</sup> nor, given the multiple origins in transcendentalism, does it privilege the notion of unity. But chiefly, the attention to history as an *economy*, a complex *structural* totality means that the notion of world as a series of discrete "appearances" is rejected<sup>81</sup>.

This economy is only given in its contradictions and departures from totality which do not head out on a linear trajectory guided by an idea, but instead is marked as excess or overflowing. This rethinking of an immanent, finite transcendence again seems to come close to Heidegger. 'It is transcendence itself. If speech is a movement of metaphysical transcendence, it is history, and not beyond history. ... Metaphysics is *economy*: violence against violence, light against light: philosophy (in general). ... This polemic is language itself. Its inscription.' [VM 146] But in this reference to language, we find opened a path that also leads to structuralism. Opposed to Levinas's reduction of history to the circuit of the same, *la parole* can indicate *both* speech *and* the piecemeal acts by which the economy of *la langue* is altered over time. In this regard, the stress on the space for rupture and alteration within the economy (which can be transformed in a way the series cannot) reveals its play [*jeu*], which alone enables the thinking of God [VM 133] even if theology is concerned to reduce that play through the imposition of the positive infinite, however ineffable [VM 183]<sup>82</sup>.

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<sup>80</sup> This would be the teleological and eschatological legacy in the concept of history that leads him to think it suspect. In *Rogues*, Derrida opposes the 'urgency' of the 'here and now' (that does not wait) to the regulative idea and its 'remote future' [*Rogues* pp. 86-92].

<sup>81</sup> From this perspective, I concur with Hobson's rejection of Bennington's suggestion that *différance* 'just is the postponement to infinity of the Kantian Idea' [OL 240 fn. 56]. For Hobson's discussion of the role of the Kantian Idea in Husserl and Derrida's reading of it see OL 46-58.

<sup>82</sup> Ventriloquizing Bataille, where writing opposes *Erinnerung*, Derrida writes: 'In interpreting negativity as labour, in betting for discourse, meaning, history, etc.. Hegel has bet against play, against chance. He has blinded himself to the possibility of his own bet, to the fact that the conscientious suspension of play (for example, the passage through the certitude of oneself and through lordship as the independence of self-consciousness) was itself a phase of play; and to the fact that play *includes* the work of meaning or the meaning of work, and includes them not in



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The comments and abortive analyses turn in on and against themselves. Appearing to accept a fundamental historicity of the living present<sup>83</sup>, it seems to oppose itself to finding meaning in a history or *History*, since that depends on giving an ethical validation to the temporalization and historicization [*Gramm* 139]. There is history in a certain sense but its overdetermination by the classical metaphysics of time and presence (viz. the unity of the series) means its continued use is problematic, since a philosophical concept of history cannot escape a comprehension of what is produced by sense, which has only ever been thought on the basis of presence and as presence. 'To put it quite summarily, one seeks in vain to extract the question of meaning (the meaning of time, or of anything else) as such from metaphysics, or from the system of so called "vulgar" concepts.' [*Ousia* 51]<sup>84</sup> As emphasised by Marrati, there can only be a vulgar concept of time, because time 'belongs to metaphysical conceptuality' *per se*: 'the construction of another concept of time could be no more than a reorganization of other metaphysical predicates'<sup>85</sup>.

We find this in the thought of the 'closure' (*clôture*) of history from the concluding pages of *Speech and Phenomena*.

'The history of being as presence, as self-presence in absolute knowledge, as consciousness of self in the infinity of *parousia* – this history is closed. The history of presence is closed, for "history" never meant anything but the presentation of Being, the production and recollection of beings in presence, as knowledge and mastery. Since absolute self-presence in con-

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terms of *knowledge*, but in terms of *inscription*: meaning is a *function* of play, is inscribed in a certain place in the configuration of meaningless play.' 'From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve' [1967] translated Alan Bass in *Writing and Difference* (London & New York, Routledge, 2001), pp. 317-350, pp. 328-29.

<sup>83</sup> 'If the living present, the absolute form of the opening of time to the other in itself, is the absolute form of egological life, and if egoity is the absolute form of experience, then the present, the presence of the present, and the present of presence, are all originally and forever violent. The living present is originally marked by death. Presence as violence is the meaning of finitude, the meaning of meaning as history.' [VM 166]

<sup>84</sup> Cf. the comments on time in '*Ousia* and *Grammē*': 'Time, then, would be but the name of the limits within which the *gramme* is thus itself comprehended, and, along with the *gramme*, the possibility of the trace in general. *Nothing* other *has ever been* thought by the name of *time*. Time is that which is thought on the basis of Being as presence, and if something ... is to be thought beyond the determination of Being as presence, it cannot be a question of something that could still be called *time*.' [*Ousia* 60]

<sup>85</sup> *Genesis and Trace* p. 135.



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sciousness if the infinite *vocation* of full presence, the achievement of absolute knowledge is the end of the infinite, which could only be the unity of the concept, logos, and consciousness in a voice without *differance*.' [SP 102]

It seems that it is not simply Heidegger who must change horizons from Dasein's temporality to a consideration of Being's epochality. As Derrida summarises contra Levinas's interpretation, Being is always dissimulated, in its 'erring', as beings in its being determined [VM 180]. 'Without this dissimulation of Being by the existent there would be nothing, and there would be no history. That Being occurs in all respects as history and as world means that it can only retire beneath ontic determinations in the history of metaphysics. For historical "epochs" are metaphysical (ontotheological) determinations of Being which thus brackets, reserves itself beneath metaphysical concepts.' [VM 180] In Derrida's notion of the trace and the ascription of 'logocentrism' to the history of Western philosophy we see this legacy detoured, an inheritance that again attempts to deflate the 'reemergence' of eschatology in this account [VM 181].

Marrati<sup>86</sup> and Hobson [OL 12] note Derrida's wariness with respect to the notions of epochs as stage of history which would be *both* determined as unities according to certain fundamental characteristics *and* determined as epochs of a *unified* history. It is not clear what assures us of these co-ordinates. Yet Marrati makes no mention in her book of the very *epochality* of Derrida's coinage, logocentrism. Although distinct from Heidegger<sup>87</sup>, and insisting on a new understanding of epoch<sup>88</sup>, it is precisely this point at which the speculative 'exorbitance' of Derrida's early work reaches its peak.

Hobson is attuned to this problem. It is only this exorbitance, the attempt to achieve a 'point of exteriority' with respect to logocentric metaphysics, that

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<sup>86</sup> Marrati *Genesis and Trace* 'Being is Not Gathered' pp. 87-113.

<sup>87</sup> 'Derrida undertakes to show that wherever the sending of being divides itself, and it has to divide itself in order for there to be history, this divisibility challenges the *legein* and the very idea of destination, of a unitary destination.' [ibid. p. 95]

<sup>88</sup> '... one must understand the expressions "epoch", "closure of an epoch", "historical genealogy" in a new way; and *must first remove them from all relativism*.' [Gramm 14. my italics]



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allows logocentrism as an epoch to appear. But this move is problematic: 'what is the position from which the unity of an epoch can be understood?' [OL 17]<sup>89</sup>

On the one hand, according to Hobson, there is a 'hyperbolic move' which precipitates a totality in the move to exceed it [OL 40]: this would bring Derrida close to a certain movement in Hegel<sup>90</sup>. On the other hand, there is the attempt to demonstrate that the metaphysical claims from within this 'totality' cannot be maintained. History does not *end* in any 'vulgar sense', but its accepted comprehension within a framework of valorised presence is no longer *in effect*. History was '*expressed as the unfolding of the structure or schema of an absolute will-to-hear-oneself-speak*' – this is now not able to be maintained [SP 102]. But what begins now?

The speculative dimension to writing is located in the attempt to steer a 'passage between two epochs' [Gramm 24]. Where one of the epochs is a conceptuality 'destined, or already submitted, to decay' [Gramm 85] and the other cannot be understood as a 'nonknowledge that is knowledge to come' [*comme savoir à venir*] [SP 103]. An epoch that is already underway is not *instigated* by Derrida or deconstruction: he addresses a 'delimitation of the ontology of presence' at large in the current era. The epoch of logocentrism is marked by the privileging of speech, as the voice hearing itself, over writing<sup>91</sup>. The auto-affection of the voice heard by my ear as the paradigm of presence guaranteeing certainty can be traced from Plato to Husserl<sup>92</sup>. But presence is 'no longer that to which

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<sup>89</sup> In 'Interpretations at War', Derrida compares Cohen's 'fable' about the German-Jewish psyche with his own: 'from what external location can one claim to pronounce upon this truth of truth?' [op.cit. p. 159]

<sup>90</sup> For more on the relation between Hegel and Derrida, see Gasché's *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1986).

<sup>91</sup> The point of exteriority may well be geographic or, rather, the epochal designation of logocentrism is geographically delimited. *Of Grammatology* notes that Japan and China bespeak of civilizations 'developing outside all logocentrism', where the 'strange valorization of speech' is not encountered [Gramm 89-90]. Elsewhere, Derrida asks whether there is metaphysics (as we understand it) 'outside the Indo-European organization of the function "to be"'. 'The Supplement of the Copula', p. 199.

<sup>92</sup> In 'Violence and Metaphysics', Levinas is included under this rubric of a dead conceptuality. The gestures made against logocentrism are repeated here. We have already noted the use of 'eschato-logy', but Derrida also questions Levinas's privileging of the presence of the speaking speaker, and concomitant suppression of the written, to ask: can one not invert all Levinas's statements on the voice and use *writing instead*? [VM 126] Noting *en passant* that the writer in absenting from presence is better able to address the other, he then asks how an avowed Judaic



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everything refers in the last analysis'<sup>93</sup>; in this climate, Derrida opposes false dawns as well as premature post-mortems<sup>94</sup>.

In 'The Ends of Man', Derrida foregrounds the writing that responds to this epochal predicament. There would appear to be two choices:

1. The preparation of an 'exit without changing terrain', where the openness of the foundational concepts and gestures is repeatedly demonstrated. But: 'The continuous process of making explicit, moving toward an opening, risks sinking into the autism of the closure.'<sup>95</sup> And where the danger of such autism, in its consolidation, might be the reduction of philosophy to an existential project.
2. A writing which *decides* to change terrain to effect a discontinuous break. The risk here is that one is deceived and rather than breaking, one is simply reconstituting the old terrain under the vestiges of a new vocabulary – this would be a '*more naïve and strict inhabitation of the old structure*'<sup>96</sup>.

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inspiration could 'belittle' the letter. He concludes that the thought of the 'trace' 'should lead to a certain rehabilitation of writing' (though this concept only appears in the essays after *Totality and Infinity*, Derrida was able to make 'brief allusions' to them prior to the first publication of this essay) [VM 127]. A long footnote on Levinas's similarity to Eric Weil contains as a penultimate sentence the following: 'One should ask whether the predetermination, common to these two systems, of violation and of pure logos, and, above all, the predetermination of their incompatibility, refers to an absolute truth, or perhaps to an epoch of history of thought, the history of Being.' [VM 403 fn. 42] Some examples of Levinas's privileging of speech: 'The presence of the interpretative key in the sign to be interpreted is precisely the presence of the other in the proposition, the presence of him who can come to the assistance of his discourse, the teaching quality of all speech. Oral discourse is the plenitude of discourse.' [TI 96] See also TI 97.

<sup>93</sup> 'Différance' p. 24.

<sup>94</sup> Though arguing that deconstruction is not to be as the psychoanalysis of philosophy ('Freud and the Scene of Writing' [1966] translated by Alan Bass in *Writing and Difference* [1967] (London & New York, Routledge, 2001), pp. 246-291, p. 246), it is 'necessary to think both the law which somehow governed the desire for a center in the constitution of structure, and the process of signification which orders the displacements and substitutions for this law of central presence – but a central presence which has never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute.' ['Structure, Sign and Play' p. 353.]

<sup>95</sup> Op. cit. p. 135.

<sup>96</sup> Derrida gives an example of this risk: 'To know why one says "structure" is to know why one no longer wishes to say *eidos*, "essence," form, *Gestalt*, "ensemble," "composition," "state," "system," etc. One must understand not only why each of these words showed itself to be insufficient but also why the notion of structure continues to borrow some implicit signification from them and to be inhabited by them.' 'Force and Signification' p. 380 fn. 2.



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Here, Derrida insists that there cannot be a simple choice between these two strategies – a new writing must pursue both tacks: '*one must speak several languages and produce several texts at once*'<sup>97</sup>. The change of style in writing must be plural<sup>98</sup>.

This plurality can be hypostasised in a certain manner. On the one hand, *deconstruction* 'indefinitely questions presence within the closure of knowledge' [SP 102] subjecting those texts to an undermining from within. Part of this effort is directed to uncovering the metaphoricity of the language utilised by philosophy and other sciences: uncovering their everyday legacy and the implicit valorised metaphysics with which the former is imbued. On the other, *grammatology* will trace the 'indefinite drift of signs' decoupled from the trope of presence<sup>99</sup>. Grammatology will not be able to 'write its discourse on method or to describe the limits of its field.' [Gramm 4] The reason being that it attempts to question a certain pre-given, and unquestioned conception of language, whilst, at the same time, having to articulate these questions within that pre-given conceptuality<sup>100</sup>.

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<sup>97</sup> The preface to the essays collected in *Margins of Philosophy* announces an attempt to displace philosophy through '*philosophically intransigent analyses*', that would write *otherwise* so that the philosopher can no longer recognize himself or herself in philosophical texts. 'Tympan' [1972] translated by Alan Bass in *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1982), pp. ix-xxix.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Hobson's discussion of the closing paragraphs of 'Structure, Sign and Play' and her remarks regarding hesitation and incoherence [OL 25]. 'Ernst constructed himself ... not by linear repetition, with no stages in procedure at all, nor by an embedded repetition, like Russian dolls, where the stages are separate, but by a movement which can loop between stages .... It is a tangled hierarchy. Likewise, Derrida's commentaries loop between text and metacommentary: they cannot be prised off what they comment on, and this is true in detail too: if one pattern of thinking, of grouping of texts ... seems to have hegemony, it is soon turned like a glove, re-sited, becoming part of what it seemed to control.' [OL 171]

<sup>99</sup> For a further dimension of grammatology, and the manner in which it troubles a reading of Derrida's work, please see Appendix B.

<sup>100</sup> '... every text of metaphysics carries within itself, for example, *both* the so-called "vulgar" concept of time *and* the resources that will be borrowed from the system of metaphysics in order to criticize that concept' [Ousia 60]



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#### The trace and *différance*

Derrida's formulations with respect to this possible exceeding of logocentrism vary at times testing the limit of hyperbole and confusing those (me) attempting to paraphrase in order to demonstrate some lemma or other<sup>101</sup>. This confusion ought simply to demonstrate a gulf between him and Levinas's futural orientation as the strategic imposition of a pre-determined idea.

But the manner of Derrida's own speculation might be such that we worry about the extension of that very term, speculation, to him<sup>102</sup>. The consequences he seems to advance are that with the 'demise' of presence as an unquestioned philosophical anchor, we no longer know what knowing is. The question seems to be whether this is merely a sceptical point or if the gestures 'beyond' can be understood as effecting or inaugurating any new epoch. Or whether such a question can be asked depending as it does on a certain precomprehension. Or whether such a precomprehension is always inevitable<sup>103</sup>. But it cannot be anticipated as the 'truth' that will redeem the current epoch – in the sense of being its ultimate reference.

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<sup>101</sup> Hobson: '[A]ny attempt either to construct a rigorous system or to exit from metaphysics seems to be condemned to be a version of the Liar paradox, the metaphysical discourse which says that all metaphysical discourse is vitiated, and ... this is an account often given of Derrida's work.' [OL 24]

Derrida: 'The concepts of originary *différance* and of delay are unthinkable within the authority of the logic of identity or even within the concept of time. The very absurdity betrayed by *the terms* provides the possibility ... of thinking beyond that logic and that concept. The word "delay" must be taken to mean something other than a relation between two "presents"; and the following model must be avoided: what was to happen (should have happened) in a (prior) present A, occurs only in a present B. The concepts of originary *différance* and originary "delay" were imposed on us by a reading of Husserl.' 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', p. 427 fn. 5.

<sup>102</sup> 'In the delineation of *différance* everything is strategic and adventurous. Strategic because no transcendent truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of the field. Adventurous because this strategy is not a simple strategy in the sense that strategy orients tactics according to a final goal, a *telos* or theme of domination, a mastery and ultimate reappropriation of the development of the field. Finally, a strategy without finality, what might be called blind tactics, or empirical wandering if the value of empiricism did not itself acquire its entire meaning in its opposition to philosophical responsibility.' Derrida 'Différance', p. 7.

<sup>103</sup> It is in this context that one can understand the otherwise gnomic reference to Jorge Luis Borges: 'Perhaps universal history is but the history of the diverse *intonations* of a handful of metaphors.' [VM 114, translation adjusted]. Derrida makes the radical suggestion that one might never escape from within this extreme historicisation created by language as material condition of thought unable to be mastered in intuition and therefore *meaning*.



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'In order to exceed metaphysics it is necessary that a trace be inscribed within the text of metaphysics, a trace that continues to signal not in the direction of another presence, or another form of presence, but in the direction of an entirely other text. Such a trace cannot be thought *more metaphysico*. No philosopheme is prepared to master it. And it (is) that which must elude mastery. Only presence is mastered.' [*Ousia* 65]

The 'trace' does not effectuate a voluntarist break with language inherited – the very text of metaphysics shelters the trace and enables it to be named. The thought of the trace '... can no more break with transcendental phenomenology than be reduced to it' [Gramm 62]. And not simply phenomenology, for it owes its charge to more than one tradition. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida asks: why *use* the word 'trace'? [Gramm 70] And provides the following answer:

'If words and concepts receive meaning only in sequences of differences, one can justify one's language, and one's choice of terms, only within a topic and an historical strategy. The justification can therefore never be absolute and definitive. It corresponds to a condition of forces and translated an historical calculation. Thus, over and above those that I have already defined, a certain number of givens belonging to the discourse of our time have progressively imposed this choice upon me. The word *trace* must refer to itself to a certain number of contemporary discourses whose force I intend to take into account. Not that I accept them totally.' [Gramm 70]

Reconstructing the conjuncture of those givens in France of the 1960s may prove to be indispensable (and not simply an exercise in intellectual history), but is not possible within the remit of this dissertation. In the Introduction to this thesis, we noted how the 'trace' connected Levinas and Derrida, who has subsequently stressed the differences in the usage of the term made by the two of them<sup>104</sup>. We have also noted the link to Heidegger. Here, in both 'Différance' and *Of Grammatology*, Derrida nods to two other authors: 'This deconstruction of presence accomplishes itself through the deconstruction of consciousness, and therefore through the irreducible notion of the trace (*Spur*), as it appears in both Nietzschean and Freudian discourse.' [Gramm 70] This adds a conflicting dimension to the 'trace': the subterranean character of *Nachträglichkeit*<sup>105</sup> (foreign to the *Selbstbesinnung* of phenomenology) informs the opposition

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<sup>104</sup> The next chapter will examine the Levinasian idea of the trace in the traumatic past which was never present.

<sup>105</sup> For more on time, *Nachträglichkeit* and *Verspatung* as well as Derrida's relation to Freud see 'Freud and the Scene of Writing'.



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contained in the trace (and text as 'chain of traces') to *discourse* – the 'the present, living conscious *representation* of a text within person who reads or writes it' [Gramm 101].

'The living present springs forth out of its non-identity with itself and from the possibility of a retentional trace. It is always already a *trace*. This trace cannot be thought on the basis of a simple present whose life would be within itself; the self of the living present is primordially a trace. The trace is not an attribute; we cannot say that the self of the living present "primordially is" it. ... This protowriting is at work in the origin of sense.' [SP 85]

But we must be wary of hypostatizing this notion, remaining as it does parasitic upon metaphysics. 'There is no trace *itself*, no *proper* trace.' [Ousia 66] No trace is proper to itself – it is this self-present reflexivity that it challenges. But it serves to struggle to think, gesture towards, the moments covered over by the privilege of presence in *the same texts*. As such, 'trace' must always be '*sous rature*', serving a function within the economy of the text and project, but always overdetermined by its negation of ontological presence and its avowed avoidance of naïve empiricism with its concomitant nominalism.

Is the 'trace' tied to writing in this way? If so, what is its relation to *différance*? This might be too quick, but it seems that *différance* is taken to be more fundamental, or 'older' than Heidegger's ontological distinction.

'If Being, according to the Greek forgetting which would have been the very form of its advent, has never meant anything except beings, then perhaps difference is older than Being itself. There may be a difference still more unthought than the difference between Being and beings. We certainly can go further toward naming it in our language.' [Ousia 67]

The 'trace' would be that which escapes from any complete determination through singular reference, but *différance* suggests a writing without presence and without absence. '... without history, without cause, without *archia*, without *telos*, a writing that absolutely upsets all dialectics, all theology, all teleology, all ontology. A writing exceeding everything that the history of metaphysics has comprehended in the form of Aristotelian *grammē*, in its point, in its line, in its



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circle, in its time, and in its space.' [*Ousia* 67] One might hazard the analogical structure: Being  $\Leftrightarrow$  beings  $\equiv$  *différance*  $\Leftrightarrow$  trace.

The (non-) notion of *différance*, apparently not a concept, makes its first appearance in the final, difficult pages of the introduction to Husserl's 'The Origin of Geometry'.

'The impossibility of resting in the simple maintenance [nowness] of a Living Present, the sole and absolutely absolute origin of the De Facto *and* the De Jure, of Being *and* Sense, but always other in its self-identity; the inability to live enclosed in the innocent undividedness of the primordial Absolute, because the Absolute is *present* only in being *deferred-delayed* [*différant*] without respite, this inability and this impossibility are given in a primordial and pure consciousness of Difference.' [*Origin* 153 translation modified]

*'L'impossibilité de se reposer dans la maintenance simple d'un Présent Vivant, origine une et absolument absolue du Fait et du Droit, de l'Être et du Sens, mais toujours autre dans son identité à soi-même, l'impuissance à s'enfermer dans l'indivision innocente de l'Absolu originaire, parce qu'il n'est présent qu'en se différant sans relâche, cette impuissance et cette impossibilité se donnent en une conscience originaire et pure de la Différence.'* [OG 171]

Again, its functional role is to 'think' 'the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences'<sup>106</sup>, perhaps to think time in more originary fashion<sup>107</sup>. But in which case, it is not clear whether origin can still be used<sup>108</sup>. In the eponymous essay, Derrida essays the idea that there is only a 'strategic justification' of *différance* – its work depends on the conjuncture in which it is located.

Can the theological designation of this concept be avoided by noting that it might one day be superseded, as Derrida suggests? Can we think the *duration* of its conjunctural relevance? Could this be profitably pursued in relation to

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<sup>106</sup> 'Différance' p. 11.

<sup>107</sup> Hobson: '... for Derrida's Heidegger, time is the impossibility of escaping that synthesis whose index is the way tense operates in language.' [OL 120]

<sup>108</sup> Marrati *Genesis and Trace* p. 107. Derrida: 'To say that *différance* is originary is simultaneously to erase the myth of a present origin. Which is why "originary" must be understood as having been *crossed out*, without which *différance* would be derived from an original plenitude. It is a non-origin which is originary. ... *différance* is determined outside and teleological and eschatological horizon. Which is not easy.' 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' p. 255.



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Heidegger's *Umkehrung* in its epochal horizon? In seeking to put something to question, to *dramatize* a question for philosophy does it risk opportunism? Would it come close to what we diagnosed in Levinas, a wager?

Or is its 'negative' procedure, attempting to make as rigorous as possible this questioning, still distinct from the foresight of Levinas? In the essay, 'Différance', Derrida rejects both the prophetic and the kerygmatic interpretations of this writing. Its determinate opposition to certain tropes remains consistent, while being troubled over the problems thus generated for persisting within this discourse<sup>109</sup>.

#### Phenomenology and Responsibility

Phenomenology is still crucial for both the demonstration of these themes even if these themes then challenge the very self-constitution of that philosophical procedure<sup>110</sup>. What it enables to appear is the break-up of self-consciousness as simple self-presence. But this break-up does not mark a sceptical limit, rejecting all knowledge, only that we do not know what knowing is in the broader philosophical sense. It has always been tied to either a teleology that 'reduces all dehiscence between writing and wanting-to-say [*Meinen* or *vouloir-dire*]'<sup>111</sup> or collapses into a nonphilosophical empiricism that cannot think factuality as such. Phenomenology brings awareness of the historized structuring of the being of factuality ('it is thought itself in the consciousness of its complete historicity'). But such an awareness demands that the 'philosopher' negotiates the potential inauthenticity of language and take responsibility for the assertibility of that speech: 'In that respect, phenomenology as Method of Discourse is first of all *Selbstbesinnung* and *Verantwortung*, the free resolution to "take up one's own sense" (*reprendre son sens*), in order to make oneself accountable, through speech, for an imperiled pathway.' And this responsibility is opposed to the

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<sup>109</sup> 'The *infinite* difference is *finite*. It can therefore no longer be conceived within the opposition of finiteness and infinity, absence and presence, negation and affirmation.' [SP 102]

<sup>110</sup> 'For phenomenology alone can make infinite historicity appear: i.e., infinite discourse and infinite dialecticalness as the pure possibility and the very essence of Being in manifestation.' [Origin 152 OG 170 translation modified]

<sup>111</sup> *Dissemination* p. 17.



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projected management of this field through ideas and anticipations, even though it will require the co-opting of such motifs in determinate conjunctures. The reductive, genealogical method of the *Rückfrage* is the essence of this method, where responsibility is 'shouldering a word one hears spoken [*une parole entendue*], as well as taking on oneself the transfer of sense, in order to look after its advance [*pour veiller sur son cheminement*]. ... it is thought itself in the consciousness of its complete historicity [*son historicité intégrale*].' [Origin 149 OG 166] This marks an intensification of the traditional understanding of responsibility and, importantly for this thesis, it connects responsibility not simply to 'ethical relations' but to the very practice of writing<sup>112</sup>. Again, this theme would be present from the earliest published writings.

All philosophical discourse must then derive its authority from a certain phenomenology, which becomes under Derrida's transformation a propaedeutic for *decision*, which would not be a 'neutral preface or *perambulatory* exercise of thought' [Origin 149]. As such, phenomenology's clarification ('exhaustion') of sense in its eideticity and historicity is the precondition for approaching factuality with appropriate *seriousness*:

'The "why" can only emerge [*surgir*] from the *possible* (in the metaphysical or ontological sense, and not in the phenomenological sense) nonbeing [*non-être*] of historical factuality; and nonbeing *as* nonhistory [*le non-être comme non-histoire*] only discloses [*laisse dévoiler*] its *eventuality* on the basis [*à partir de*] of a consciousness of pure sense and pure historicity, i.e., on the taking up of *possibility* in the phenomenological sense [*C'est-à-dire d'une conscience de possibilité au sens phénoménologique*].' [Origin 150 OG 167-68 translation modified]<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> In his translator's introduction to *Otherwise than Being*, Lingis describes the goal of Husserl's *Crisis* texts as 'absolute self-responsibility' in theoretical life; the will to supply a reason for every fact [*OtB* xi]. This distinguishes the philosophical attitude for Derrida: 'a *philosopher* would feel that he or she first of all had to understand, analyze, give reasons and be responsible for the supposed meaning of his or her language.' [*Rogues* 136]

<sup>113</sup> 'But we do not believe anymore [*ne croyons pas non plus*] either that this question can ever, in *philosophical discourse*, simply precede transcendental phenomenology as its presupposition or latent ground [*fondement*]. On the contrary, this question would mark within philosophy in general the moment wherein phenomenology completes itself [*s'achèverait*] as the philosophical propaedeutic for every philosophical *decision* – a moment moreover conceived by Husserl. Since this propaedeutic is always announcing itself [*s'annonçant*] as infinite, that *moment* is not a factuality but an ideal sense, a right which will always remain under phenomenological jurisdiction, a right that phenomenology alone can exercise by explicitly anticipating the end of its itinerary.' [Origin 150 OG 167 translation modified]



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Responsibility or propaedeutic suggests an affirmation, but this affirmation or anticipation can in itself not be foregrounded *philosophically* as responsible discourse and indeed limns the *strategic* dimension of deconstruction, often referenced by Derrida but unfortunately (along with 'force') left underdeveloped.

#### Transcendental Propaedeutic and Empiricism

Such a propaedeutic is unending. In 'Hors-texte' Derrida connects it to the Hegelian self-presentation of the concept, this 'methodology' is not 'preliminary', it is the very production of science, a 'living historicity of method'<sup>114</sup>. But a method without shored-up origin and end. The *decision* comes not simply when urgency interrupts the foregoing analysis but marks the exorbitant *commencement* itself – having to start from 'wherever we are'<sup>115</sup> without the redemption of the methodological structure in its unfolding of the positive absolute: 'The preface can become a discourse on method, a treatise on poetics, a set of formal rules, only after the forging of the irruptive track of a method that is actually *put into practice* as a path that breaks ground and constructs itself as it goes alone, without a predetermined itinerary.'<sup>116</sup>

But this 'departure' from the norms of philosophical bad faith, which believes that it can give itself methodological assurances for its content, appears as radically empiricist or voluntarist [*Gramm* 162]. Empiricism names an approach to philosophical presentation but one which springs from a failure to subject the categories of thought to investigation. Above all, for the Derrida of the 1960s, it is the danger that accompanies all attempts to reduce philosophy to a cultural phenomena that can be circumscribed by the human sciences *without* first testing the metaphysical 'secret cargo' of those same sciences, *which still belong to that philosophical inheritance*. The understanding of empiricism as a philosophical position depends upon a pre-critical stance valorising position-taking

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<sup>114</sup> *Dissemination* pp. 12-13.

<sup>115</sup> 'We have to begin *wherever we are* ... in a text where we already believe ourselves to be.' [*Gramm* 162]

<sup>116</sup> *Dissemination* p. 29.



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(*Standpunktsphilosophie*) without concern for the inability to sustain that discourse – it is implicitly philosophy as *Weltanschauung* or technique.

As written, deconstruction must leave a sign of its working and of what remains unresolved as it works through the text of metaphysics: 'Without that track, abandoned to the simple content of its conclusions, the ultra-transcendental text will so closely resemble the precritical text as to be indistinguishable from it.' [Gramm 61]<sup>117</sup> It is this sign that attempts to distinguish the apparent assemblage or parataxis of figures (Freud-Nietzsche-Heidegger-Levinas) producing the 'trace'.

In his comments in *Of Grammatology* on the necessity of *bricolage* (a form of theft), Derrida notes that the *bricoleur* cannot 'justify the discourse' adopted but that the idea of breaking with *bricolage* depends on a 'creationist theology'<sup>118</sup>. 'The already-there-ness of instruments and of concepts cannot be undone or re-invented. ... it builds its castles with debris. ... The idea of the engineer breaking with all *bricolage* is dependent upon a creationist theology. Only such a theology<sup>119</sup> can sanction an essential and rigorous difference between the engineer and the *bricoleur*.' [Gramm 138-39] However not all *bricolages* are equally worthwhile – they must criticise themselves! Such criticism could only be produced by accumulating conflicting materials which are allowed to work off each other as conflicting palimpsests<sup>120</sup>. It is only this dimension which can distinguish critical *bricolage* from nominalist, historicist empirical practice without recourse to onto-theology (to which Lévi-Strauss's distinction between *bricoleur* and 'engineer' still belongs). Propaedeutic and responsibility constitute a vigilance '...which takes history, that is finitude, seriously; a philosophy aware of itself as *historical* in each of its aspects ... and aware of itself, as Levinas says in another sense, as *economy*. But again, an economy

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<sup>117</sup> It is my contention that in the ethico-political turn, that track has partly 'gone underground' in order to better activate certain other dimensions of grammatology. The critical *presentation* is sacrificed to the reproducibility of certain texts. See Appendix B.

<sup>118</sup> On the same topic, see Derrida 'Structure, Sign and Play'.

<sup>119</sup> Derrida observes that Lévi-Strauss's discourse 'is produced through concepts, schemata, and values that are, systematically and genealogically, accomplices of this theology and this metaphysics' [Gramm 135]

<sup>120</sup> Cf. Spivak 'Translator's Preface' to *Of Grammatology* pp. ix-lxxxvii (especially p. lxxv).



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which in being history, can be *at home* neither in the finite totality which Levinas calls the Same nor in the positive presence of the Infinite' [VM 146].

This not-being-at-home must underwrite deconstructive writing even as it contests legibility and intelligibility<sup>121</sup>. For this reason, 'inhabiting' or 'inworming' mobilises the 'irreducible necessity of a *trick of writing*' [Gramm 24], whose outcome is unclear, and whose ambition might merely be 'to draw out ... a signification which a presumed future reading will not be able to dispense with' [Gramm 149]. Its own constitutive indefiniteness cannot draw a line under any achieved result.

'The movements of deconstruction do not destroy the structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure ... the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work.' [Gramm 24]

It demonstrates the opening or hesitation in the dominant discourses, but its attempt to expand writing or graphics by 'using up' the tradition or writing by 'crossing out' [*rature*] commits itself in different directions, which are not

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<sup>121</sup> These references to intelligibility and legibility raise the question of the connection between Barthes and Derrida. For Barthes, *écriture* is that which exceeds the historically conditioned forms of legibility and intelligibility, but it can do so only by *theft* and *dissimulation*. This attempt to go beyond legibility is expressed by Barthes as follows:

'To act as though an innocent discourse could be held against ideology is tantamount to continuing to believe that language can be nothing but the neutral instrument of a triumphant content. In fact, today, there is no language site outside Bourgeois ideology: our language comes from it, returns to it, remains closed up in it. The only possible rejoinder is neither confrontation nor destruction but only *theft*; fragment the text of culture, science, literature, and change its features according to formulae of disguise, as one disfigures stolen goods. Faced with the old text, therefore, I try to efface the false sociological, historical, or subjective efflorescence of determinations, visions, projections; I listen to the message's transport not the message, I see in the threefold work the victorious deployment of the significant text, the terrorist text, allowing the received meaning, the (liberal) repressive discourse that constantly attempts to recover it, slough itself off like an old skin. The social intervention of a text (not necessarily achieved at the time the text appears) is measured not by the popularity of its audience or by the fidelity of the socio-economic reflection it contains or projects to a few eager sociologists, but rather by the violence that enables it to *exceed* the laws that a society, an ideology, a philosophy establish for themselves in order to agree among themselves in a fine surge of historical intelligibility. This *excess* is called: writing.' Barthes *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* [1971] translated by Richard Miller (New York, Hill & Wang, 1976), p. 10. [my italics] Derridean *écriture* might be presented as the philosophical redemption of Barthes's suggesting as it does that the language site is not quite the circumscribed place found here in this passage.



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necessarily exclusive (in both senses). The 'game of the world' must be thought before the forms of play (the movement and generation of signs) in it can be, but this 'game of the world' can only be thought through the horizon of its closure, a closure broached hesitantly and aporetically.

'... the attempt to achieve an opening toward the beyond of philosophical discourse, by means of philosophical discourse, which can never be shaken off completely, cannot possibly succeed *within language* ... except by *formally* and *thematically* posing the question of the relations between belonging and opening, the question of closure. Formally – this is by posing it in the most effective and most formal, the most formalized, way possible: not in a *logic*, on other words in a philosophy, but in an inscribed description, in an inscription of the relations between the philosophical and the nonphilosophical, in a kind of unheard of *graphics*, within which philosophical conceptuality would be no more than a *function*.' [VM 137-138]<sup>122</sup>

It is this 'impossible system' which cuts through the ensemble of problems constituting Levinas's position: 'The possibility of the impossible system will be on the horizon to protect us from empiricism. Without reflecting here upon the philosophy of this hesitation, let us note between parentheses that by simply articulating it we have already tackled Levinas' own problematic [*nous avons déjà abordé la problématique propre de Levinas*].' [VM 104, *VeM* translation modified]<sup>123</sup>.

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<sup>122</sup> From one perspective, Derrida suggests the linear conception of time as exhibited by Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* may depend on the manner in which the space of inscription as experienced in reading and writing now dominates the manifold of sensibility. There could be a different transcendental aesthetic guided by a new form of legibility. 'A transcendental question on space concerns the prehistoric and precultural level of spatio-temporal experience which furnishes a unitary and universal ground for all subjectivity, and all culture, this side of empirical diversity, as well as the orientations proper to their spaces and their times.' [*Gramm* 290] This new form of legibility may further fundamentally alter our relation to past writing, we could be re-read according to a different organization of space: 'because we are beginning to write, to write differently, we must reread differently' [*Gramm* 87] Several of Derrida's more notorious texts not discussed by this thesis should be understood as part of this *experimental* endeavour. See especially: Jacques Derrida *Glas* [1974] translated by J.P. Leavey and R. Rand (Lincoln, NA, University of Nebraska Press, 1986). Jacques Derrida *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* [1980] translated by Alan Bass (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>123</sup> I have opted to alter the translation of the final sentence, believing that '*aborder*' with its polyvalent sense of accosting and boarding (in both maritime senses) cannot be allowed to pass simply as 'come close to' if that is meant to imply proximity or affinity. It can be synonymous with '*entamer*' the use of which by Derrida is discussed in detail by Christopher Johnson. *System and Writing in the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993).



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### Conclusion

The two parts of this chapter have attempted to demonstrate the 'metaphysical' terrain upon which Derrida disputes Levinas's conceptions of alterity, being, exteriority and the other. In the first, I re-presented 'Violence and Metaphysics' as a critique of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* in that it:

- contests Levinas's understanding of phenomenology and the history of philosophy;
- opposes any notion of absolute otherness and Levinas's use of the "Same" and the "Other";
- insists upon the primacy of the transcendental field and the essential place of sense-explication for phenomenological *Selbstbesinnung*;
- defends the Husserlian alter ego, or at least contests Levinas's reading of the *Fifth Cartesian Meditation*;

The chief result is to suggest that *Totality and Infinity* be understood as nonphilosophy or empiricism since it does not take sufficient care over its language and presentation to achieve *philosophical presentation*: its results are produced *ultra vires* – imposed beyond the ability to justify located in its methodology.

The second part attempted a truncated summary of several of Derrida's works in order to gesture towards the meta-level commitments of what, in 'Violence and Metaphysics', Derrida terms a philosophy of 'originary finitude'. I have tried to demonstrate the manner in which Derrida's writing around history and language diverges from Levinas's understanding of Being and the Beyond such that the homonym 'trace', found in both authors, has to be understood as a tangential contact: Derrida does not inherit this term from Levinas in any straightforward manner, there is no significant 'general similarity' of 'characteristic form'.

Derrida's own 'exorbitance' or speculative moment is connected to the epochal claims associated with the understanding of logocentrism as the 'metaphysics of



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phonetic writing' and its privileging [*Gramm* 3]. Logocentrism does not name being as a whole but only one form of its organization – the one we find ourselves in but which is now 'closing off'. What comes after is neither a beyond nor a discrete new stage – neither distinct nor discontinuous, it does not culminate in or grant meaning to the logocentric epoch.

Finally, in trying to present deconstruction and grammatology as an aberrant development from phenomenology and structuralism, I highlighted how the very problem of writing is developed in relation to themes of undecidability, responsibility, event and interruptive decision. Formed in this early work, these are not new or peculiar to the writings understood beneath the aegis of the 'ethico-political turn'. Nor, from this perspective, are they produced in response to the influence of Levinas.



## Chapter Four

### *Otherwise than Being*

The previous chapter gave a detailed explication of Derrida's first essay on Levinas, 'Violence and Metaphysics'. The framework for the persistent critical themes that govern their intellectual relationship was laid there. There is a twofold dimension to this critique:

1. Levinas takes insufficient care over the problem of philosophical presentation in his borrowings from the Western tradition.
2. Derrida's philosophy of 'originary finitude' contests the very notions of the Same and the Other and the idea of a positive ethical Infinite. His metaphysical commitments differ fundamentally with respect to language, being and history even as he puts the coherence of these themes in question.

In this chapter, we turn to Levinas's move from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*. *Otherwise than Being* can be seen as responding to Derrida's criticisms in at least two senses: first, Levinas offers explicit responses to specific questions put by Derrida regarding, for example, the positive infinite; second, he makes major alterations to his philosophical co-ordinates. *Otherwise than Being* is seen as introducing the major distinction between the Saying and Said, but the alterations are much more fundamental and replace the topography I set out in Chapters One and Two. Through the thematics of diachrony and proximity, the other is located in the deepest aspect of the temporalization of the subject: its "signifyingness" must be made manifest through the responsibility taken on by the *psyche*. The new function of this term offers the possibility of *uniqueness* not to be found in the ego's participation in reason and being through *consciousness*. The glory of the *psyche* is to be found in its creation of more and more responsibilities, best exemplified by the practice of the nazirate: taking the bread out of one's own mouth to give to the other. Where the ethical in *Totality and Infinity* involved justification and apology, offering my world to the other in



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discourse; here the good will be non-discursive but constructed only through acts of giving and substitution.

This new structure will be the focus of the third part of this chapter. The second part is a brief discussion of the comments offered by Levinas in relation to philosophical presentation, empiricism, scepticism and ideology. But I begin by concentrating on Critchley's *The Ethics of Deconstruction*.

### I

#### The Ethics of Reading

As mentioned in my Introduction, Critchley has offered three distinct, though not necessarily conflicting, theses concerning the relationship between Derrida and Levinas. The strong claim of the first edition of *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (1992) was that Derrida's writing should be understood as ethical provided we understood it as ethical in *Levinas's sense*. That claim is my focus here. The other claims – that the “later Derrida” is “profoundly marked by Levinas” and borrows from Levinas at key junctures – will be examined in the final chapter. These are distinct claims that are inflected chronologically. The first claim aims at all of Derrida's writing, including ‘Violence and Metaphysics’. In detailing this, Critchley also provides an account of the manner in which *Otherwise than Being* adequately responds to Derrida. His reading is detailed, articulate and symptomatic of recent English-language reception's attempt to efface or ignore the early technical aspects of deconstruction, a common failure to move beyond the *slogans* of deconstruction towards a more concrete engagement with its workings and aims.

Following from the work of Hillis Miller<sup>1</sup>, Critchley insists that deconstruction ‘should be understood as an ethical demand’ which ‘awakens responsibility that leads to political action’. What is particular about deconstruction in these

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James and Benjamin* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1987)



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accounts is that it concerns itself with moments of alterity within texts that are suppressed by the given, dominant readings, whilst, at the same time, avoiding the reduction of the text to its material conditions of production. Both poles mark positions which assume that meaning is either ultimately transparent or extractable. Deconstruction, as a practice of reading, uncovers the evasions constitutive of readings which support stances or standard interpretations. Hence, the purpose of reading is to interrupt the received context of text and world. This patient, counter-intuitive reading is glossed as ethical and becomes the stimulus towards a political engagement with *both* the forces which generally determine acceptable readings *and* the concrete practices which depend on similar protocols<sup>2</sup>. It is a concern for what is excluded: 'Politics begins as ethics.' [ED 46]

Critchley writes: '... it is to be hoped that my book will take up Miller's fascinating, but finally aporetic formulation of the ethics of reading and deepen it philosophically with specific reference to Levinas, in order to show that its necessity is ethical in a sense not so far discussed by him [Miller].' [ED 47]

Instead of simply offering a sensitivity to that which is excluded, the ethical, as characterised by Levinas, marks the authentic response to the 'putting into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other' [ED 5]. The Other [Autrui], as other person, as singular other, produces the condition of possibility for ethics by challenging its subsumption into an order or structure through a role or position. As Critchley writes, 'the paradigmatic ethical moment is that of being pre-reflectively addressed by the other person in a way that calls me into question and obliges me to be responsible' [ED 46]. Responsibility becomes an issue insofar as a dimension previously avoided, effaced or ignored comes to the fore and ruptures habitual, unthinking conduct. It is then a question of respecting this encounter that can now not be avoided, effaced, or ignored without irresponsibility. The responsible relation, as a face-to-face between two individual egos, suspends social norms.

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<sup>2</sup> One of Miller's main challenges is to contest a desire for intellectual mastery over texts through reference to 'something nontextual outside the text'. Op. cit. p. 6.



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In this context (though I have already contested this reading of Levinas), deconstruction depends on a similar commitment to responsibility before singularity and alterity. Not only is there a duty of scholarship, but Critchley insists:

‘I would go further and claim that there is a hermeneutic principle of fidelity – one might even say ‘an “ethico-political duty”’ (*un devoir éthico-politique*) – and a minimal working notion of truth as *adaequatio* underlying deconstructive reading, as its primary layer of reading. If deconstructive reading is to possess any demonstrative necessity, it is initially by virtue of how faithfully it reconstructs that dominant interpretation of a text in a layer of ‘commentary’.’ [ED 24-25]

These notions of fidelity and adequation repeat Miller’s claim that deconstruction ‘is nothing more or less than good reading as such’ where reading is marked by the refusal to deviate from the text<sup>3</sup>. And indeed, Derrida writes of a commentary that would first be faithful to Levinas’s ‘audacities’ [VM 103] that follows the displacements effected by his texts [VM 108], where the questions raised are ‘the questions put to *us* by Levinas’ [VM 104]. But these questions are both perplexing and result from the first violence of commentary which reduces these texts to their conceptuality and systematic function [VM 397-98 fn. 7].

Critchley and Miller’s account of the practice of reading centres on a ‘doubling’ of the commentary by the responsible injunction to locate moments of alterity within the text. The ethical structure of reading is located in this prior willingness to affirm and seek out that which may not even be nameable under current conditions of intelligibility. ‘My argument is that *an unconditional categorical imperative or moment of affirmation is the source of the injunction that produces deconstruction and is produced through deconstructive reading.*’ [ED 41] [in italics in original] Thus the marked patience and attention to detail of Derrida’s reading is produced through this demand to seek within the dominant reading those moments where alterity is effaced, excluded or marginalised.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘As a reader, so it seems, I should above all have respect for the text, not deviate by one iota in my report of the text from what it says.’ *The Ethics of Reading* p. 10



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However, the violence of conceptuality described by Derrida as his own activity here already pursues systematicity over alterity – i.e., how do these claims work? The double gesture of deconstruction is misunderstood by Critchley insofar as he sees it as a double reading that produces a detailed commentary but then brings this into contradiction with *itself*. This characterisation is too abstract and developed without reference to a sufficient number of specific deconstructive readings. No movement of this sort is contained in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’. But this might mean that it is not to be understood as deconstructive. We have argued that it is a combination of critique and programmatic statement. There is nothing particularly ‘deconstructive’ about its formal construction, even the brief sections that refer to writing were mostly added to the 1963 text for its collection in the 1967 publication of *Écriture et Différence*<sup>4</sup>. Dominique Janicaud is right to criticise Critchley for talking of deconstruction in the singular, and though Critchley recognises this, he mistakes it as a reference to other *individuals* such as de Man [ED 250]. It is to be proven that a text bearing Derrida’s signature is itself deconstructive<sup>5</sup>.

The explicit treatment of Levinas remains at the level of detailed commentary and criticism, an examination of his readings of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger. What might be termed ‘deconstructive’ about the essay concerns the comments on history developed in relation to the following question: what would Levinas have to do to present this admirable concern for the other within philosophical discourse?

It is through these passages that Critchley mediates his concept of ‘*clôtural* writing’: a writing that directs itself against an intelligibility constituted by an ‘exhausted’ tradition, ‘while searching for escape from that tradition’. Thus ‘a deconstructive reading perpetually breaches this closure, disrupting its limit and allowing the movement of alterity to interrupt any unity of logocentric textuality and epochality’ [ED 29-30]. It is in this act of opening towards the other, or of

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<sup>4</sup> See Robert Bernasconi ‘The Trace of Levinas in Derrida’ in *Derrida and Difference* edited by David Wood & Robert Bernasconi (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 13 – 29.

<sup>5</sup> See *infra* the discussion of writing and plurality of styles in Chapter Three (pp. 164-65).



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suspending the legitimacy of that which dominates, that for Critchley marks the ethical dimension of deconstruction [ED 88].

He reads this practice as a resistance to structuralist totality found throughout phenomenology and thereby connects deconstruction to remarks that Levinas makes concerning history [ED 68]. For Levinas, a history of interiority would break with 'economic' history by producing a history for those without works or texts. For Critchley, '*Clôture* reading is history read from the standpoint of the victims of that history. It is, in a complex sense, *ethical* history.' [ED 30]

An explicit reference to 'doubling' that might be seen to support this reading can be found in 'Signature, Event, Context' (1971):

'...deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralisation [of classical metaphysics and its vestiges]: it must by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practise an *overturning* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to *intervene* in the field of oppositions that it criticises, which is also a field of nondiscursive forces.'<sup>6</sup>

Derrida here acknowledges that the conditions of possibility for an intervention consistent with deconstruction, that is one that *overturns* and *displaces*, without reproducing ungroundable metaphysical commitments, require a 'doubling' of gesture, science and writing. This 'doubling', or 'dual writing', responds to the linguistic determination of philosophy: no language is immune from metaphysics, metaphysical language is the 'only available language'; yet, one has to learn how to write 'while not subscribing to its premises'. But this quotation does not straightforwardly outline a practice directed towards alterity. And here we should be mindful of the comments given in the previous chapter regarding his 'deafness' to the division made by Levinas between the Same and the Other.

From this perspective, we might already note a slippage in the argument or presentation. It is one thing to link the deconstructive passage between two epochs to concern for alterity. It is another to equate this with Levinas's concern

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<sup>6</sup> 'Signature, Event, Context', p. 329.



for the Other. Firstly, Derrida does not subscribe to Levinas's notion of 'internal history'. From our discussion in Chapter Three we can here repeat two points:

1. Derrida emphasises that acknowledgement of the Other must first be the 'letting-be' of the other in its mode of appearing in being from within the 'Same'<sup>7</sup>. Alterity must be already within the same for there to be play in the same – being is not closed in on itself. The other 'cannot be absolutely exterior to the same without ceasing to be other' [VM 158].
2. The 'finite totality' opposed by Derrida is that *utilised by Levinas* not by structuralism. The notion of *economy* or *system* is opposed to any understanding of a finite totality and a infinite that would transcend that totality.

Derrida's reading of the history of philosophy as the history of logocentrism is based upon his diagnosis of an *insufficiently justified*, metaphysical valorisation of presence throughout this history (up to and including Heidegger). That "phenomenology", through its intensification of the problem of grounding, has enabled us to achieve this insight does not mean that it is valorised contra structuralism. Indeed, Derrida's examination of the workings of *Evidenz* in Husserl and its connection to the speaking, self-present voice, shows that one cannot inhabit phenomenology securely, in good conscience<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, this lack of justification and the concomitant undecidability does not come from *without*: Derrida will repeat the notion of self-deconstruction and later, auto-immunisation<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> "“To let be” is an expression of Heidegger’s which does not mean, as Levinas seems to think, to let be as “object of comprehension first,” and, in the case of the Other, as “interlocutor afterward.” The “letting-be” concerns all possible forms of the existent, and even those which, *by essence*, cannot be transformed into “objects of comprehension.” If it belongs to the essence of the Other first and foremost to be an “interlocutor” and to be “interpellated,” then the “letting-be” will let the Other be what it is, will respect it as interpellated-interlocutor. The “letting-be” does not only, or by privilege, concern impersonal things.’ [VM 172]

<sup>8</sup> See Jacques Derrida *Speech and Phenomena*.

<sup>9</sup> Derrida 'The "World" of the Enlightenment to Come (Exception, Calculation, Sovereignty)' [2002] in *Rogues* pp. 118-59.



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Structuralism is already part of this 'decay' of a model that had always previously privileged presence. Here, it is important to stress undecidability, alterity within, as the privileged consequence over any *breaching* (as if there were two demarcated epochs already given and identified between which one could hop). In French, *les clôtures* are the hoardings which surround a building to be demolished – deconstruction attempts to erect or show the closure of a certain form of conceptuality, which is to some extent the closure of an epoch of *history*. So long as this concept is determined by a notion of meaningful presence it no longer operates as it did, but this does not point to an end of history. This does not equate to a writing that oscillates between two orders or effaces one in favour of the other, as in Levinas. Suspending the legitimacy of what dominates, foregrounding undecidability, might open towards the to-come but this is not the Other in Levinas's sense as Idea guiding practice and its positings. The strong stress Derrida makes on differentiating *futur* from *avenir* – relates directly to this point. Levinas requires a *futur* to justify his present practice, Derrida the *à-venir*, that which is to come and is not anticipated by the current instantiations. Elsewhere, he will write of an attempt to intensify transformations already underway and to prepare institutions for the future.

Such fundamental differences are further effaced by Critchley when he turns to the distinction, introduced in *Otherwise than Being*, between the Saying [*le Dire*] and the Said [*le Dit*]<sup>10</sup>. If the Said is the statement, assertion or proposition that can be systematically arranged in philosophy, the Saying is that 'performance' which cannot be 'caught in constative propositions'. The speaking of the Other as Other produces an interruption of logos, but an interruption that occurs through the Said. The question with which Levinas wrestles is the following: 'How is the Saying, my exposure to the Other, to be Said, or given a philosophical exposition that does not utterly betray this Saying?' [ED 7] How does the ethical, the transcendent, signify in ontological language? the introduction of the Saying and the Said, addresses this problem by attempting to

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<sup>10</sup> Caygill in contrast insists that this is not the 'key' to *Otherwise than Being* [L&P 131].



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find an ‘opening beyond philosophical or ontological language *within* language’<sup>11</sup>.

That is, the introduction of the distinction between the Saying and the Said appears in *Otherwise than Being* in such way as to be interpreted as a response to the criticisms made by Derrida in his review of *Totality and Infinity*. As Critchley writes: ‘If there is an under-determination and a certain philosophical naïveté about the possibility of an ethical language in *Totality and Infinity*, then this is completely transformed in *Otherwise than Being* where the aporias entailed in the attempted expression of the ethical in the language of ontology become, arguably, the central preoccupation.’ [ED 259]

Critchley notes that the ethical Saying must proceed ‘through an abuse of language’ [ED 18] and this ‘abuse’ is identified with that doubling practised by deconstructive writing. *Otherwise than Being* is taken as a paradigmatic example of the ‘performative enactment’ of ethical writing: it proceeds through a particular ‘rhythm’ of *sériature* – a knot of interlaced interruptions: ‘Levinasian textuality ... obeys a *sériatural* or *clôtural* rhythm of binding and unbinding which preserves the absolute priority of the ethical obligation.’ [ED 128]

The general schematic of the argument for homology between Levinas and Derrida is as follows. Levinas presents the Other as that which interrupts the Same, or the self-consistent Said (materially instantiated in laws, institutions, etc.). This duality of Saying / Said is mapped onto a distinction between performative and constative. Because deconstruction appears to put in question the self-consistency of the Same and, at the same time, to be concerned with the limitations of constative presentation it is seen to be consistent with the Levinasian project.

I will concentrate on *sériature* in the next chapter. Suffice to say here that it is in fact a term coined by Derrida to describe Levinas’s writing in *Otherwise than Being*. I will argue that it is not a positive ascription but a parodic demonstration

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<sup>11</sup> See *Autrement que Savoir* where Levinas understands Derrida’s criticisms of his work as a criticism of his ‘borrowing’ from authors whom he criticizes. *Autrement que Savoir*, pp. 68-9.



of the manner in which Levinas's metaphors disrupt the conceptual framework presented. In addition, Derrida will not accept so clean a distinction between the constative and the performative as offered by Critchley, since *pace* Husserl's distinction between axiomatic and originary evidence, Derrida will insist that no constative statement can stand by itself in such fashion.

This reading would have Levinas himself moving towards a *clôtural writing*. Unfortunately, Critchley's valorisation of this distinction<sup>12</sup> means that he ignores two important questions:

1. Does Levinas correctly identify the criticism that Derrida produces in 'Violence and Metaphysics'?
2. And does the introduction of the Saying and the Said meet this criticism?

To flesh out these questions, let us turn to Critchley's account of the turn from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being* which can be found in a section in his forth chapter entitled 'Scepticism'. Earlier, in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Critchley raises the rhetorical question: 'doesn't Derrida show that Levinas's overcoming of ontology is dependent upon the totalizing ontologies it sought to overcome?' [ED 13] In the innocent posing of this question, Critchley accepts that Levinas's comments on scepticism in *Otherwise than Being* are directed against Derrida's reading [OtB 153ff]. In summarising Derrida's argument in 'Violence and Metaphysics', Critchley presents it as the criticism of a self-contradictory discourse that even as it bespeaks another metaphysics of experience depends upon the language that it is seeking to criticise [ED 161].

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<sup>12</sup> We should perhaps note that Critchley does not wrestle with the issue of speech and writing. Derrida makes only cursory reference to this problem but that reference bites deep. Given Derrida's analyses of writing, when he asks whether one could invert all of Levinas's statements regarding the voice so as to use writing instead, isn't one obliged to note how central this question is to Derrida's general project? Not only does Derrida note that the writer makes himself [sic] absent and thereby better addresses himself to the other, but he also observes that Blanchot, a writer sympathetic to Levinas, disputes the pre-eminence granted to oral discourse and identifies it as a vestige of humanism. [VM 126-127]



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Although not a scepticism, Levinas insists that the response of Saying is inspired by scepticism's suspicion of dogmatism. The persistent return of scepticism throughout the history of philosophy, despite its repeated refutation, shows that something of its inspiration haunts philosophy, and that this refutation always takes the form of showing that scepticism disallows the pertinence of its comments as soon as it opens its mouth. In contrast, Critchley takes Levinas to be offering a '*clôtural* critique of critique, which shows how scepticism returns after its refutation' [ED 162]. He equates this repositioning of an animating scepticism to the necessary problem of writing from within that which one opposes<sup>13</sup>. Here lies the beginning of the romanticised understanding of Derrida and Levinas's 'conversation' or worse, 'exchange of gifts'.

Our previous chapter emphasised the repeated objection that *Totality and Infinity* remains an empiricism that does not achieve the level of *philosophical* presentation. Critchley briefly deals with this reading at the beginning of his book: 'This seemingly disparaging remark would lead one to believe that Derrida's own position is opposed to – or at least differs from – that of empiricism. Strangely, this is not at all the case.' [ED 14] Referring to *Of Grammatology's* discussion of the empiricist gesture within Derrida's work [Gramm 162], Critchley concludes that 'Derrida is trying to explicate certain necessities within discourse which all philosophers ... are obliged to face' [ED 15]<sup>14</sup>. This is inadequate. Chiefly, this reading of deconstruction fails to foreground the reference to *bricolage* in 'Violence and Metaphysics' and *Of Grammatology*. It does not attend to the distinction made between bricolages –

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<sup>13</sup> This reading dominates Critchley's thinking to the extent that he claims that phenomenology is premised upon the refutation of scepticism, insofar as phenomenology is founded by the 'Prolegomena' to Husserl's *Logical Investigations*. But more accurately, psychologism is the target of that piece. Husserl is concerned to show that the laws of logic are not simply a contingent feature of the human psychology, but a transcendental condition of the possibility of meaning *per se*. That is, Husserl investigates intentionality after having shown that the meaning of the underlying Objectifying Act is only possible given logical laws that have normative character. Husserl grounds the ideality of meaning and language in the structural adequation between meaning and experience in the intentional act. This adequation of meaning and object of intentional act founds phenomenological methodology and depends upon the self-evidence [*Evidenz*] of meaning.

<sup>14</sup> Critchley repeats this reading in the second edition of *The Ethics of Deconstruction*: 'Derrida is not denouncing an incoherence in Levinas ... rather he is wondering about the meaning of the *necessity* that provokes incoherence: a necessity to which Derrida's own discourse is subject.' [ED 257]



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some of them criticise themselves and leave an ‘ultratranscendental track’ that distinguishes it, however slightly from empiricism. What Derrida identifies in his critique, is not the problem of self-contradictory discourse, but that of *justification* of discourse.

Certainly Derrida repeats formulations such as the following: ‘We are not denouncing here an incoherence of language or a contradiction in the system. We are wondering about the meaning of a necessity: the necessity of lodging oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it.’ [VM 139] But the philosophical challenge is to respond to that necessity by a new form of writing, a hyper-critical self-conscious writing that finds it necessary to use new operators: the graft, paleonymy, erasure, etc.. Levinas nowhere in *Totality and Infinity* struggles with the demands of presentation.

This is the *de jure* problem of critical philosophy – how is one justified in speaking this way? This distinction is tied to phenomenological *Selbstbesinnung* – taking responsibility for sense through an investigation of conceptual resources and the quasi-transcendental structure of subjectivity. It is not that it tries to speak philosophically about that which cannot be spoken of philosophically, nor that it inevitably borrows from what it criticises, but that it does not make this a problem that it reflects upon; it does not raise its presentation to the level of philosophy by sufficiently justifying both its discourse *and* the object of that discourse. That is, Derrida does not imitate the traditional arguments against *scepticism* but instead maintains the post-Kantian problematic of *critical* philosophy – how does one *justify* the methodology, concepts, language and linguistic protocols adopted. Because *Otherwise than Being* is a *more* metaphysical work than *Totality and Infinity*, this problem of language is intensified *not* resolved. What is crucial is Levinas’s relation to empiricism, not scepticism.

My reading is that Levinas, and Critchley, *both* fundamentally misconstrue the charges levelled at Levinas by Derrida *and* that the alterations introduced by *Otherwise than Being* make Derrida’s criticism *more* pertinent. *Otherwise than Being* continues to espouse a Husserlian phenomenology – it is *apparently* the



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method used to identify where concepts and being break up [*OtB* 183-84]. Levinas's metaphysical supplement to that break-up depends on two planes, the ethical and the given of separation. The ethical may be unnameable in the language of the Said, but it is "postulated" as an idea; for Derrida, the unnameable is that which is not-yet-known, that which is to come. Where Critchley writes of 'reduction' and the task of the philosopher as 'enacting a spiralling movement', an 'oscillation' between two orders [*ED* 259], he misses the fundamental point; Derrida's question is: what has justified the *postulation* of the two orders in the *first place*? It cannot be *phenomenological description*. This is more fundamental than the *presentational* issue of how to talk about the ethical order in the order of the Said. And it is not a problem confronting deconstruction since that does not postulate an alternative plane of being as a positive infinite – the closure of an epoch is not *postulated* from a point external to that epoch.

In answer to our first question, we can say, 'no' – the main criticism made by Derrida in 'Violence and Metaphysics' has been misunderstood by both Levinas and Critchley. The second asks whether the introduction of the Saying and the Said can meet this criticism. Before concluding, we need to examine some other comments that Levinas makes about critical philosophical presentation. These relate first to ideology.

## II

### Empiricism, Scepticism and Ideology

In 'Violence and Metaphysics', Derrida suggested that Levinas had a certain non-Marxist conception of philosophy as ideology in that reason was held to cover over its violent aims in the suppression of the other and its complicity with a certain bureaucratic reduction of the individual [*VM* 121]. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas responds to questions about whether his *own* discourse is ideological or illusory. What is revealing is the manner in which the fundamental question is evaded in his response.



It is developed in relation to the distinction between being and not being, where the *otherwise than being* marks an excluded middle as capacity of the human: the potential to escape the objective order.

‘Even if the ego were but a reflection forming an illusion and contenting itself with false semblances, it would have a signification of its own precisely as this possibility of quitting the objective and universal order and abiding in itself. Quitting the objective order is possible in the direction of a responsibility beyond freedom as well as toward the freedom without responsibility of play.’ [*OtB* 197 n. 24]

There are different possibilities for the human individual to leave objective being, exemplified by the opposition of *play* and *responsibility*. However, the possibility of disinterestedness only lies with responsibility<sup>15</sup>. Levinas’s endeavour is to avoid a philosophy of immanentism, associated with Zeno, Spinoza and Hegel, where existence ‘has no exits’ [*OtB* 176]. Levinas raises, or stirs up, the possibility that not all meaning proceeds from essence.

Involving a pun in the French, *désintéressé* implies selflessness but also can be read as *désinter-essé* – to remove oneself from being, as in the Latin verb to be, *esse* (*être*). Play is allied with distraction and intoxication as a false attempt to evade the seriousness of responsibility. Justice, on the other hand, requires dis-inter-estedness which, Levinas claims, separates all ‘truth from ideology’ [*OtB* 45, *OtB* 190 fn. 34]. Here is confirmed Derrida’s diagnosis regarding Levinas’s use of the term: ideology relates to a motivation hidden behind reasoning, every move of consciousness on behalf of itself (consciousness’s *conatus*) is rationalization or ‘lie’ [*OtB* 131]. Since the disinterested has no such motivation, it is free from such suspicion.

‘The word *better*, and the Good it expresses ... perhaps makes all our discussion suspect of being “ideology.” But the least intoxicated and most lucid humanity of our time ... has in its clarity no other shadow, in its rest no other disquietude or insomnia than what comes from the destitution of the others. Its insomnia is but the absolute impossibility to slip away and distract oneself.’ [*OtB* 93]

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Being is play or *détente*, without responsibility, where everything possible is permitted.’ [*OtB* 6]



The clarity of consciousness is overshadowed by other unethical concerns, while the disinterested is only oriented by destitution. This concern is pure to a degree which renders all 'science' suspect insofar as it privileges truth-content over the individual. Levinas attributes this modern phenomenon to Hegel who reduces existence to the game of unfolding the combinations of reason: 'It has made us think that [truth] rather resides in the unsurpassable plenitude of the content thought. In our days truth is taken to result from the effacing of the living man behind the mathematical structures that *think themselves out* in him, rather than he that thinks them.' [translation altered] [*OtB* 58] The human sciences exemplify this concern for empirical content in an atrophied theoreticism that studies the conditioned nature of thought over and against practical demands created by the fact of destitution. Here Levinas repeats the Kantian gesture of the primacy of the practical orientation of reason over the theoretical.

'[The scientist] runs the risk of taking his desires as realities without realizing it, of letting himself be guided by interests which introduce an inadmissible trickery into the play of concepts (despite the control and criticism that his partners or team-members can exercise), and of thus expounding an ideology as science. The interests that Kant discovered in theoretical reason itself subordinated it to practical reason, which becomes reason pure and simple. It is just these interests that are contested by structuralism, which is perhaps to be defined by the primacy of theoretical reason. But disinterestedness is beyond essence.' [*OtB* 58]

That is, the concern for theoretical truth can be in the service of a state-dominated status quo. The very suggestion that Levinas's concepts and system might be ideologically subtended is rebutted by the counter-claim that sees any such question as politically motivated by a cynical indifference<sup>16</sup>. It is only through orientation by practical reason that dogmatism, ideology and a certain quietism is avoided<sup>17</sup>. Regarding the last, Levinas rejects the 'wolf-stepping

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<sup>16</sup> The human sciences have to mimic a cynical, sober society: 'in order to account for the impossible indifference with regard to the human which does not succeed in dissimulating itself in the incessant discourse about the death of God, the end of man and the disintegration of the world ... but in which the wreckage preceding the catastrophe itself, like rats abandoning the ship before the shipwreck, come to us in already insignificant signs of language in dissemination.' [*OtB* 59] One might hazard the 'reminiscence' that 'dissemination' here names Derrida. There is a further reference to the 'jetsam of dissemination' at *OtB* 47.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Caygill's suggestion that the distinction between theoretical and practical reason is suspended in Levinas [*L&P* 100].



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movement of discourse' found in the later Heidegger: the 'extreme prudence to not frighten the game perhaps dissimulates the impossibility of not flushing it out' [*OtB* 182]. To this end, transcendence is contrasted with 'house-keeping' [*OtB* 184].

This transcendence is integral to the valuation of the human found in those issues which prove rebarbative to science and are excluded without warrant. The pure experience of fraternity proves to transcend the question: 'men stand who have never been more moved ... than by other men in whom they recognize an identity even in the indiscernibility of their mass presence, and before whom they find themselves irreplaceable and unique in responsibility' [*OtB* 58]. It becomes a form of baseline, ethical cogito. Although Levinas mentions the 'suspicion' generated by psychoanalysis and sociology, and indeed references Ricoeur's *The Conflict of Interpretations* here [*OtB* 191 fn. 43], he concludes:

'But we do not need this knowledge in the relationship in which the other is a neighbor and in which before being an individuation of the genus *man*, a *rational animal*, a *free will*, or any essence whatever, he is the persecuted one for whom I am responsible to the point of being hostage for him, and in which my responsibility, instead of disclosing me in my "essence" as a transcendental ego, divests me without stop of all that can be common to me and another man, who would thus be capable of replacing me.' [*OtB* 59]

Somehow the very notion of responsibility evades essence, being, consciousness and all that is prey to the masters of suspicion (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud)<sup>18</sup>. That is, there are 'complexes' that cover over the individual, but these 'do not alter this holiness, but sanction the struggle for exploited man' [*OtB* 59]<sup>19</sup>.

But surely it is one thing to advocate a feeling of compassion for fellow humans, another to interpret this as responding to the *holiness* of 'man'<sup>20</sup>? Is it only

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<sup>18</sup> See Paul Ricoeur *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* translated by Dennis Savage (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1970), p. 32ff.

<sup>19</sup> 'One can call it utopian, yet it is the exact situation of men, at least in our time, when intellectuals feel themselves to be hostages for destitute masses unconscious of their wretchedness. Intellectuals are today mistrustful of a philosophy of the one keeper of his brother, the-one-for-the-other set forth as significations par excellence; they would scornfully call it humanist and even hagiographical.' [*OtB* 166, cf. *OtB* 184]

<sup>20</sup> On the alterity of the other, '... *on ne peut pas mettre en question la sainteté. ... La priorité de l'autre sur moi, je l'appelle sainteté.*' (one cannot question the holiness .... The priority of the other over me, I call holiness) *Autrement que Savoir*, p. 72.



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because of holiness that any struggle is sanctioned? The charge of ideology in Levinas is dismissed with what amounts to a one-line argument and contrasts badly with Ricoeur's appreciation of the need for a hermeneutic method to mediate itself through the discourses of suspicion.

But where is the argument to demonstrate that this ascription of saintliness is not merely subjective? What is Levinas's argument in favour of prophecy as opposed to reducing it to an ideological formation?

'That prophecy could take on the appearances of information circulating among others, issued from the subject or from influences undergone by the subject, starting with those that would come from its own physiology, or from its wounds or its triumphs – that is the enigma, the ambiguity, but also the order of transcendence, of the Infinite. The Infinite would be belied in the proof that the finite would like to give of its transcendence; entering into conjunction with the subject that would make it appear, it would lose its glory. Transcendence owes it to itself to interrupt its own demonstration. Its voice has to fall silent as soon as one hears from it its message [*Sa voix doit se taire dès qu'on en écoute le message*]. It is necessary that its pretension be exposed to derision and refutation, to the point of suspecting in the "here I am" that attests to it a cry or a slip of a sick subjectivity. But of a subjectivity responsible for the other [*autre*]! There is an enigmatic ambivalence, and an alternating of meaning in it. In its saying, the said and being are stated, but also a witness, an inspiration of the same by the other [*Autre*], beyond essence, an overflowing of the said itself by a rhetoric which is not only a linguistic mirage, but a surplus of meaning of which consciousness all by itself would be incapable. Here there is a possibility both of ideology and of sacred delirium: ideology to be circumvented by linguistics, sociology and psychology; delirium to be reduced by philosophy, to be reduced to signification, the-one-for-the-other, a mission toward Another [*vers Autrui*] in the glory of the Infinite. Transcendence, the beyond essence which is also being-in-the-world, requires ambiguity, a blinking of meaning which is not only a chance certainty, but a frontier both ineffaceable and finer than the tracing of an ideal line. It needs the diachrony that breaks the unity of transcendental apperception, which does not succeed in gathering together [*rassembler*] the time of modern humanity, in turn passing from prophecy to philology and transcending philology (for it is incapable of denying the fraternity of men) toward prophetic signification.'

[*OtB* 152, *AqE* 238 translation modified]

There are several important points contained in this passage. Firstly, one could note the register of incarnation that brings the 'Judaic' themes close to those enfolding the incarnation in Christian atonement theory – i.e., the necessary exposure and humility endured by the prophetic and the Messiah. The Infinite must be incarnated through the subject but in so doing commits itself to an



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essential ambiguity or enigmaticity, whose surplus can only be measured by the *inspiration* generated. Secondly, although the human sciences might circumvent this problem of inspiration, they cannot ultimately account for the experience of fraternity otherwise. Thirdly – and this is elided in Lingis's translation given its retreat from any distinction in the English between *l'autre*, *l'Autre*, and *l'Autrui* – *l'Autrui* is positioned in the aiming at transcendence that *philosophically* reduces sacred delirium – that is, the religious transformation of enthusiasm into a practice of social relations as outlined in Chapter Two. Fourthly, transcendental apperception is held to be incapable of collecting modern humanity into a constructive, productive force. This latter point in favour of transcendence over and against transcendentality is not investigated further in *Otherwise than Being*. It rather repeats the persistent theme, practical reason and that for which one can hope in the name of fraternity displaces any question of ideology.

This invoked diachrony leads to the discussion of scepticism and the challenge of writing from within manifest being towards the beyond. Levinas admits that his book is intended as philosophy and therefore makes recourse to systematic language, but that objections against his misuse of that language are 'facile' *and like those thrown at scepticism* [*OtB* 155]. The 'extraordinary possibility' of scepticism lies in its reminder to philosophy that the said, which is unable to hold up its independent truth claim, depends on a pre-originary saying that cannot be fully thematized [*OtB* 192 fn. 18]. '[Theoretical propositions] do not answer the proximity of the neighbor.' [*OtB* 155] But the attempt to reveal this deficit must be made in language:

'By the very fact of formulating statements, is not the universality of the thematized, that is, of being, confirmed by the project of the present discussion, which ventures to question this universality? Does this discourse remain then coherent and philosophical? These are familiar objections! ... our whole purpose was to ask if subjectivity, despite its foreignness to the said, is not stated by an abuse of language through which in the indiscretion of the said everything is shown. Everything is shown by indeed betraying its meaning, but philosophy is called upon to reduce that betrayal, by an abuse that justifies proximity itself in which the Infinite comes to pass.' [*OtB* 155-56]



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Despite the invocation of scepticism, the endeavour remains closer to negative theology since it insists from the beginning on postulating something beyond language at which the abuse of language aims. The demand is on Levinas both to justify that postulation and the success of the abuse of language. On the one hand there is the saying of the speaker who produces what congeals into the said, this saying can also be an unsaying and is essential to the diachronic passing from prophecy to philology and back [*OtB* 62]. On the other hand, there is a signifyingness that belongs to a different diachrony – the diachrony which resides at the heart of subjective temporalisation: the explication of this diachrony attempts to justify the assertion that ‘subjectivity is foreign to the said’. The intelligibility of this structure will animate substitution and responsibility<sup>21</sup>.

The key move in this argument is the insistence that the oscillation between prophecy and philosophy or philology is never maintained *simultaneously* – it is never allowed to come together in the coherent presence of a system. This should be seen as a response to Derrida, since in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ he makes the point explicit:

‘... the expression “infinitely other” or “absolutely other” cannot be stated and thought *simultaneously*; that the other cannot be absolutely exterior to the same without ceasing to be other; and that, consequently, the same is not a totality closed in open itself, an identity playing with itself, having only the appearance of alterity, in what Levinas calls economy, work, and history.’ [*VM* 158 my emphasis]<sup>22</sup>

The later might be seen to prompt the opening frames of *Otherwise than Being*, and indeed the title: ‘To be or not to be is not the question where transcendence is concerned. The statement of being’s *other*, of the otherwise than being, claims

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<sup>21</sup> In his introduction to the translation of *Otherwise than Being*, Lingis distinguishes two kinds of saying: one (A) that is expressive of inner sensation which is distinct from the saying (B) that makes entities ‘exhibit themselves’: ‘There is a sensitivity to the other, a saying that is the sensibility’s being-for-the-other [B], which sustains the saying that is nominalization and predication [A].’ [*OtB* xxvi] I think it is more accurate to distinguish B in terms of ‘signifyingness’ – the attempt to ‘say’ it always requires ‘unsaying’ since it is to treat it as something that can be exhibited by entities, which is an always abusive assumption. Though Levinas does write of ‘saying without the said’ in this regard.

<sup>22</sup> This comment is supplemented by a footnote to the cited segment ‘the other cannot be absolutely exterior’: ‘Or at least cannot *be* ...’ [*VM* 404 fn. 45].



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to state a difference over and beyond that which separates being from nothingness – the very difference of the *beyond*, the difference of transcendence.’

[*OtB* 3] The insistence of departing from synchronicity breaches Derrida’s charge. Levinas writes:

‘The periodic return of skepticism and of its refutation signify a temporality in which the instants refuse memory which recuperates and represents. Skepticism ... is a refusal to synchronize the implicit affirmation contained in saying and the negation which this affirmation states in the said. The contradiction is visible to reflection, which refutes it, but skepticism is insensitive to the refutation, as though the affirmation and negation *did not resound in the same time*.’ [*OtB* 167-168 my emphasis]

The claim is that post-factum reflecting consciousness oversees the coherence of the set of statements but is not sensitive to a difference between the saying of the said, and saying *as exposure*.

For Levinas, Western philosophy is philosophy of the Same, because it believes that the saying is exhausted in the said, but scepticism uncovers what is covered and dominated in this privilege of the said [*OtB* 168]. What Levinas attempts to valorise is this *interval* that eludes synchronised statements. He distinguishes in this regard two kinds of intelligibility: ‘To intelligibility as impersonal logos is opposed intelligibility as proximity.’ [*OtB* 167]

In certain aspects, this might chime with Derrida’s opposition to logocentrism, were it not for the fact that Levinas’s *opposition to the impersonal* depends on a privileging of presence since it is primarily the valorisation of the voice and self-presence – the very personality of the first person. As we will see, this does not quite resolve the issue, since *Otherwise than Being* will reposition the *psyche* as the fundamental structure underneath the speaking ego. This set aside, Levinas points towards a writing form that would evade the apparent need to subordinate the second intelligibility of proximity, to the first of logos and statement<sup>23</sup>. But such philosophical writing would still endeavour to indicate this unthematizable originary saying, and in this way its task is ‘... to measure the pre-ontological

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<sup>23</sup> ‘... since the very discussion which we are pursuing at this moment counts by its said, since in thematizing we are synchronizing the terms, forming a system among them, using the verb to be, placing in being all signification that allegedly signifies beyond being? Or must we reinvolve alternation and diachrony as the time of philosophy?’ [*OtB* 167]



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weight of language instead of taking it only as code (which it is also)' [OtB 43]<sup>24</sup>. Here this task again echoes Husserlian phenomenology, in its reference to *reduction*:

'We must go back to their signification beyond ... the comprehending activity or passivity in being, the said, the logos and the amphibology of being and entities. The "reduction" is made in this movement. It involves a positive phase: to show the signification proper to the saying on the hither side of the thematization of the said.' [OtB 43 cf. OtB 53]

Philosophy, for Levinas, would perform an 'endless critique' of the said and in doing so loosens 'the grip of being' [OtB 44] in order to uncover the more fundamental signification that is accessed only from the said, the 'simultaneity' which is only the situation of the speaking ego [OtB 77].

Levinas's discussion of ideology and scepticism do not adequately respond to the *critical* questions put by Derrida in 'Violence and Metaphysics' and hence Critchley's attempt to connect the Saying / Said distinction to Derrida's deconstructive writing is fundamentally misguided.

### III

#### The New Topography of the Psyche

However, the introduction in *Otherwise than Being* of the contrast and *non-simultaneity* between the *signifying* of originary proximity and the speaking ego (speaking takes place in the same time as being) opposes the model of separation from *Totality and Infinity*, 'as though speaking consisted in translating thoughts into words and consequently in having been first *for-oneself* and *at home with oneself* [*chez soi*], like a substantial consistency' [OtB 48].

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<sup>24</sup> 'If man were only a saying correlative with the logos, subjectivity could as well be understood as a function or as an argument of being. But the signification of saying goes beyond the said.' [OtB 37] One could also connect the notion of the 'pre-ontological weight' of language with Derrida's interest in the 'originary appurtenance' of language and desire.



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The separated ego in its *dwelling* was precisely a substantial consistency only subsequently ruptured by the master. Levinas equates the saying of proximity to a *no longer dwelling*, a visceral 'fission' of self: 'This being torn up from oneself in the core of one's unity, this absolute non-coinciding, this diachrony of the instant, signifies in the form of one-penetrated-by-the-other. The pain, this underside of skin, is a nudity more naked than all destitution.' [*OtB* 49]

*Otherwise than Being* offers a completely different account of human individuals as others. No longer is there offered an account of the separated egoist being encountering a teacher who brings more than the being contains. Nearly every aspect of this model is absent<sup>25</sup>.

'These are not events that happen to an empirical ego, that is, to an ego already posited and fully identified, as a trial that would lead it to being more conscious of itself, and make it more apt to put itself in the place of others. What we are here calling oneself, or the other in the same, where inspiration rouses respiration, the very pneuma of the psyche, precedes this empirical order, which is part of being, of the universe, of the State, and is already conditioned in a system. Here we are trying to express the unconditionality of a subject, which does not have the status of a principle.' [*OtB* 115-116]

If in *Totality and Infinity*, exteriority is produced through metaphysical Desire, here that exteriority is held to precede any empirical order, and therefore any hypostasis: the 'oneself', the 'other in the same' is already 'conditioned in a system'<sup>26</sup>. *Otherwise than Being* makes no reference to a master or teaching, but in a couple of essays contemporary with it, the question of 'awakening' or 'sobering' is raised for which an 'empirical encounter' is necessary<sup>27</sup>.

'In the awakening, between the Same and the Other, a relation irreducible to adversity and conciliation, alienation and assimilation appears. Here, the

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<sup>25</sup> Though such an 'absence' could indicate that the two analyses cover different 'terrain', and are not understood to be mutually exclusive, Levinas's failure to explain this relation leads one to suspect that the earlier positions are retracted. For an alternative account, see *L&P* 93-96. See, in addition, *infra* Chapter 1, p. 75, fn. 93.

<sup>26</sup> We might ask how it is within a system, yet able to escape being, but we have already noted that the limited thinking of 'being' is constitutive of Levinas's philosophy.

<sup>27</sup> See 'From Consciousness to Wakefulness' [1974] in *DEwH* 153-68. 'Philosophy and Awakening' [1977] in *DEwH* 169-79. In a contribution to *Autrement que Savoir*, Levinas insists that the encounter [*rencontre*] is the '*conjoncture originelle et indispensable*' a form of 'interpellation' where '*quelqu'un disant «je» s'adresse à autrui*' (someone saying 'I' addresses another) [*op. cit.* p. 68].



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Other, instead of alienating the uniqueness of the Same which it disturbs and holds, only calls it up from the depths of itself to what is deeper than itself, whither nothing and no one can replace it. Would this already be responsibility for the other person? The Other calling the Same in the deepest part of itself!' [DEwH 161]

While there might appear to be a conflict between this awakening and the repudiation of becoming 'more conscious' contained in the previous citation, consistent in the two is the theme of returning to 'inner depths' covered over, rather than reaching out to the height of the Other. It is still necessary for the subject to be "uprooted" from its egoism [DEwH 163], and indeed this uprooting, in which the primary nature of identification is unsettled, takes place through the gaze of the Other [DEwH 165] – undoubtedly an implicit reference to Sartre more than Husserl<sup>28</sup>. The encounter with the other at this level reveals the more originary traumatism, 'the first movement towards the other person' [DEwH 178-79].

Returning to *Otherwise than Being*, we can see that Levinas takes his new resources from Husserl's *Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*. Here he finds an account of the composite nature of the present in temporalization whose discontinuity is covered over by the activity of the conscious ego. The section from "Time and Discourse" on *Sensuous Lived Experience* is replete with references to this text [OtB 31ff.]. Utilising the vocabulary of retention and protention<sup>29</sup>, Levinas describes consciousness as the management of time that can be recuperated – the activities of memory and historiography attempt to construct what has been lost, but there is something more ancient than these are able to recapture: the flow of the *Urimpression* (primal impression) in which perceived, perception and perceiver are mixed [OtB 32]. Levinas takes this to be the true definition of the presencing of the present – an upsurge that overcomes or exceeds objectifying consciousness. Here:

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<sup>28</sup> 'In the "secondariness" in which, facing the face of the other (and all the expressivity of the other body of which Husserl speaks is the openness and ethical exigency of the face), the primordial sphere loses its priority, subjectivity awakens from the egological – from egoism and egotism.' [DEwH 177]

<sup>29</sup> 'Being is a manifestation in which uncertain memory and aleatory anticipation are moored; being is a presence to the gaze and to speech, an appearing, a phenomenon.' [Enigma 66]



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‘Husserl will then have liberated the psyche from the primacy of the theoretical neither in the order of know-how with equipment nor in that of axiological emotion, nor in the thought of Being, different from the metaphysics of entities. Rather, objectifying consciousness, the hegemony of re-presentation, is paradoxically surmounted in the consciousness of the present.’ [OtB 33]

This living present can only be recuperated by a consciousness that thematizes it and puts it back into the ‘normal order’. Levinas claims that Husserl’s great discovery is this living present that escapes non-theoretical intentionality – its significations are *not those of appearing, consciousness and representation* [OtB 65]. Unfortunately, in Levinas’s view, Husserl sought to objectify this field.

‘A putting the self-identity of the living present out of phase, in the intentionality of retentions and protentions, the flow looks like a multiplication of modification dispersing from the living present. In Husserl, the time structure of sensibility is a time of what can be recuperated. The thesis that the non-intentionality of the primal retention is not a loss of consciousness, that nothing can be produced in a clandestine way, that nothing can break the thread of consciousness, excludes from time the irreducible diachrony whose meaning the present study aims to bring to light, behind the *exhibiting* of being.’ [OtB 33-34]

We see here the key moves: the equation of this diachrony with a sensibility that is not amenable to consciousness’s representation and the labelling of this structure the *psyche*. The psyche has a function in *Otherwise than Being* that it did not have in *Totality and Infinity* (if indeed that term even appeared in the earlier book). Instead of providing an account of an ego qua hypostasis in being, which is then ruptured, the new account of diachrony places the rupture *prior* to any egoic formation at the very root of internal temporalization, at the ‘astonishing divergence of the identical from itself!’ [OtB 28]. The dehiscence or diastasis of the identical underlies any unity of apperception which is always ‘recapture and reminiscence’<sup>30</sup>, the ego-subject’s consciousness is simply part of the ‘way being carries on’ [OtB 134].

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<sup>30</sup> ‘Being’s essence is the temporalization of time, the diastasis of the identical and its recapture or reminiscence, the unity of apperception. *Essence* does not first designate the edges of solids or the moving line of acts in which a light glimmers; it designates this “modification” without alteration or transition, independent of all qualitative determination, more formal than the silent using up of things which reveals their becoming already weighted down with matter, the creaking of a piece of furniture in the silence of the night.’ [OtB 29-30]



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The question is whether this remainder can be redeemed. Levinas believes it can: 'Already the synthesis of retentions and protentions in which Husserl's phenomenological analysis, through an abuse of language, recuperates the lapse, bypasses the ego.' [*OtB* 51-52] It is necessary however to develop the appropriate abuse of language. Critchley summarises this as follows: 'Levinas's basic and extraordinary claim is that the concrete case in which time temporalizes itself as diachrony is in the everyday event of my responsibility for the Other. The Other's alterity is that which I cannot lay hold of, that which always exceeds my grasp or my free decision.' [*ED* 166] The move that Levinas has to make is to demonstrate or construct this connection between a remainder and an 'everyday experience': fraternal responsibility. This is the primary motivation for the development for the thematics of signifyingness and saying<sup>31</sup>.

As noted by Lingis, no 'metalanguage' can capture this remainder or distension: 'Philosophy has to exist in this ambivalence, between the intelligibility of system and synchrony and the intelligibility of signifyingness itself which is assymetry and diachrony.' [*OtB* xxxvii] The distinction between the saying and the said attempts to foreground this problem to avoid the absorption of everything into the said. But it also points to this 'primal impression' as a saying *without a said* [*OtB* 45], a fundamental signifyingness not incorporated into the said at all. This should be stressed, since on occasions it seems that the saying is understood only as an attempt to speak the beyond being, the infinite, in the language of being. The 'saying without the said' points to a fundamental result of phenomenological research, one that is again taken up and reinterpreted by Levinas. So, 'What does saying signify before signifying a said?' [*OtB* 46]

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<sup>31</sup> One could speculate here on the influence of Derrida's essay on 'The Origin of Geometry', which insists on the themes of delay, dehiscence, and difference at the core of the Living Present: separation of constituted and constituting (understood in the Western tradition as Thought and Being) would happen after the *fact*. 'Difference would be transcendental. The pure and interminable disquietude of thought striving to "reduce" Difference by going beyond factual infinity toward the infinity of its sense and value, i.e., while maintaining Difference – that disquietude would be transcendental. And Thought's pure certainty would be transcendental, since it can look forward to the already announced Telos only by advancing on (or being in advance of) the Origin that indefinitely reserves itself.' [*Origin* 153] '*Transcendantale serait la Différence. Transcendantale serait l'inquiétude pure et interminable de la pensée œuvrant à «réduire» la Différence en excédant l'infinité factice vers l'infinité de son sens et de sa valeur, c'est-à-dire en maintenant la Différence. Transcendantale serait la certitude pure d'une Pensée qui, ne pouvant attendre vers le Telos qui s'annonce déjà qu'en avançant sur l'Origine qui indéfiniment se réserve, ....*' [*OG* 171]



‘It [saying] imprints its trace on the thematization itself. which hesitates between, on the one hand, structuration, order of a configuration of entities, world and history for historiographers and, on the other hand, the order of non-nominalized apophansis of the other, in which the said remains a *proposition*, a proposition made to the neighbour, “a signifyingness dealt” [*significance baillée*] to the other.’ [OtB 46-47]

By shifting the connection to the other here, Levinas believes he has found the source of the attention through which intentionality is awakened *in the first place* [OtB 29]. In this way, he breaks with an intersubjectivity of *we* and *dialogue*, which always assumes the ‘we’ that is to be demonstrated (not to mention, the presumption of free beings engaging in banter) [OtB 119-20]<sup>32</sup>. Intentionality begins instead in *proximity* – a thematization of the way in which sensibility itself motivates consciousness [OtB 63]<sup>33</sup>. Proximity understands intentionality to commence from a command or a wound, a trauma irrecoverable to memory [OtB 88].

‘The saying in which a speaking subject is exposed to the other is not reducible to the objectification of a theme stated. Who then came to wound the subject so that he should expose his thoughts or expose himself in his saying?’ [OtB 84]

Proximity underscores a disjunctive, disturbing, forgotten (though never present to consciousness) engagement with the other: this is an engagement with ‘humanity’ [OtB 81-83] but without mediation or ideality [OtB 100]. The question is then raised: what is opened by uncovering this structure? It must somehow construct a different possibility for consciousness and the ego on new terrain:

‘We must stay with the extreme situation of a diachronic thought. Skepticism ... set forth and betrayed the diachrony of ... conveying and betraying. To conceive the *otherwise than being* requires, perhaps, as much audacity as shown by scepticism shows, when it does not hesitate to affirm

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<sup>32</sup> ‘Astonished to find itself implicated in the world of objects ... consciousness will search its memory for the forgotten moment in which unbeknownst to itself it allied with objects or consented to apperceive itself in union with them. Such a moment, when awakened by memory, would become, after the event, the instant of an alliance made in full freedom. Such a reduction refuses the irreducible anarchy of responsibility for another.’ [OtB 76]

<sup>33</sup> ‘The other to whom the petition of the question is addressed does not belong to the intelligible sphere to be explored. He stands in proximity.’ [OtB 25]



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the impossibility of statement while venturing to *realize* this impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility.' [OtB 7]

As already noted, and in contrast to some current readings, Levinas does not espouse a scepticism. Instead he seeks a new path with diachrony. Its audacity lies in equating the hold the *Good has over the present* with that diachrony which prevents the subject from '*joining up with itself like a transcendental ego*' [OtB 57]. Emblazoned in two section headings from Chapter Five, Levinas opposes the "Subject as Speaking that is Absorbed in the Said" to the "Responsible Subject that is not Absorbed in Being". The responsible subject attempts to extend the diachronic remainder and resist the pull of unified egoity, of self-possession, by maintaining or exposing the basic vulnerability of sensibility. This is an *interpretation* akin to that already discussed in Part One of this thesis.

With respect to this vulnerability, Levinas holds that sensibility is meaningful in a manner that undercuts Husserl's understanding of meaningful intentionality [OtB 66]. One might see a slip based on the play in the notion of meaningfulness, but the claim remains that the *psyche* is constituted in conjunction with the attempt to preserve this diachronic structure (what 'signification signifies before it gets bent into *perseverance in being* in the midst of a Nature' [OtB 68]) outside consciousness and ego. This figure is repositioned through the synonym of 'maternity'<sup>34</sup> – the psyche is presented as being bound to others before its own body [OtB 67, 108 etc.]. The relation to the neighbour as one of indebtedness is the embodiment of this new mode – a mode alternatively described as an 'obsession with all the others' [OtB 77].

We should pause here to make a few observations before moving to consider both this new structure of psyche and ego as competing components within the individual and the new Infinite generated by the practice of nazirate, giving the bread out of one's own mouth, appropriate to this 'maternal', vulnerable psyche. We will ask in what way it can be understood to escape being.

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<sup>34</sup> 'Not because, as preoriginal, it would be more originary than the origin, but because the diachrony of sensibility, which cannot be assembled in a representational present, refers to an irrecoverable pre-ontological past, that of maternity.' [OtB 78]



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In relation to this use of ‘maternity’, Sandford has argued that the new category cannot be understood to undo or replace the category of ‘paternity’ in *Totality and Infinity*, nor can it displace the concerns outlined in the earlier chapters about Levinas’s sexism. She further notes that maternity does not generate fraternity<sup>35</sup>. I agree. However, whilst not generating fraternity, maternity is the name for a psychical structuring that best preserves fundamental fraternity. As regards this new thinking of affective sensibility, Sandford notes that Derrida either failed to take this into account in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ or assumed it was subordinated to conceptual formations<sup>36</sup>. I feel that this dimension was simply absent from *Totality and Infinity* and that Derrida’s asides regarding the ‘encounter’ with the master led to this fundamental rethink. Need is surpassed by desire in the earlier work, and desire is in no sense tied to sensibility there – it is desire for the infinite Other. Though that encounter is also a disturbance or shock, irreducible to phenomenology, it is distinct from the trauma described in the later book. Shock breached a formed ego, trauma is held to lie beneath all consciousness and ego-formation. The claim to a new *intelligibility*, or meaningfulness, of sensibility in proximity is a new, distinct topography of the other. Sandford continues by querying this claim: ‘It is the possibility of being intelligible otherwise, rather than recalcitrant to intelligibility, that concerns Levinas here, thus seemingly undermining the idea that it is affectivity that is doing the work.’<sup>37</sup> She insists that the claim that the senses have a unique meaning is unjustified, with the consequence that the phenomenological underpinnings of this narrative ‘collapse’<sup>38</sup>. My suggestion is that Levinas believes *ethics* qua response is doing the work that redeems the affective remainder – the wound or command or trauma – as long as ethics is understood as the nazirate and not the earlier thematization of apology.

In apology, my world, the egoist usurpation from being, is offered to the Other once its arbitrariness is revealed. Here there is no conscious world-for-me as yet. In this way, though agreeing with Sandford’s conclusions, I feel there is a further

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<sup>35</sup> *The Metaphysics of Love* pp. 90-92.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 117.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 118.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p. 125-27.



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step to be investigated here – the manner in which the nazirate develops from the ‘maternal’ psyche and instantiates the glory of the Infinite. The nazirate is a practice of ritualised fasting whereby what would have been eaten is given to others: ‘There must be a nazirate so that the third world, so-called underdeveloped mankind, can eat its fill, so that the West, despite its abundance, does not revert to the level of an underdeveloped mankind .... To feed the world is a spiritual activity.’<sup>39</sup>

To further detail this conception of subjectivity, it is necessary to understand the radical disjunction or distension introduced into this structure by Levinas: the self is not identical to the ego. The psyche will be seen to play a different role too.

### The Psyche

As already noted, consciousness is understood as consciousness of being, while subjectivity, the self, is associated with the ‘other in the same’ [*OtB* 25]. The self [*le soi*, or *se, soi*] is distinct from the ego [*le Moi*] [*OtB* 15]. The self is understood as a ‘passivity that cannot be taken up’ by ego and its consciousness [*OtB* 54]; it is that which is wounded or named by the command [*OtB* 53]. It is that which is individualised, as *me* (*moi* in lower case) [*OtB* 127; *AqE* 201]. The *me* is not an example or realisation of the general category of ego – the latter being associated here with the transcendental ego and an assertion of identity across multiple times [*OtB* 99]. In this regard, the *me* is individualised in a manner distinct from the *I* (*je*), which on Levinas’s reading is a fiction: ‘there is *nothing* that is named *I*; the *I* is said by him that speaks’ [*OtB* 56]. He goes on: ‘The pronoun already dissimulates the unique one that is speaking, subsumes it under a concept. But it designates only the mask or the person of the unique one, the mask that leaves the *I* evading concepts, the *I* involved in saying in the first person, absolutely unconvertible into a noun.’ [*OtB* 56]<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> ‘The Youth of Israel’ p. 133. Caygill notes that Levinas proposes the West’s general adoption of the nazirate so that ‘it does not revert to the level of an undeveloped mankind’ [*L&P* 156].

<sup>40</sup> ‘With that [what?] right does the idealist extract the ego from being and confer upon it a transcendental status, when the subject returns to being in the very stability of its status?’ [*OtB* 163]



The self, which cannot be described on basis of intentionality and representational activity [*OtB* 53], is a ‘restless’, a ‘knot’ that does not *represent* the disruption of the other, but rather goes towards the other without concern for conscious recuperation [*OtB* 84]. In the recurrence of this “movement”, a unique structure is deposited, or tied, that is represented stylistically by Levinas’s predilection for reflexive, pronomial verbs, which unsettle the agency encoded in transitive sequences<sup>41</sup>. The self, *le soi-même*, is not an ‘ideal pole of identification across psychic silhouettes’ [*OtB* 104]. Instead it forms a unique arrangement that is neither thing nor being.

‘The uncancellable recurrence of the oneself in the subject is prior to any distinction between moments which could present themselves to a synthesizing activity of identification and assemblage to recall or expectation. ... The oneself does not enter into that play of exposings and dissimulations which we call a phenomenon (or phenomenology, for the appearing of a phenomenon is already a discourse).’ [*OtB* 104]

So what is it then? The oneself, or psyche, is held to be a particular form of ‘dephasing’, where the ego or same is prevented ‘from coinciding’ [*OtB* 68]. This effect is achieved through substitution – the assumption of responsibility. Through service to the other, a uniqueness (individuation in the accusative form<sup>42</sup>) is produced that accords with the primary intelligibility of signification [*OtB* 69]: ‘The psyche, the-one-for-the-other, can be a possession and a psychosis; the soul is already a seed of folly.’ [*OtB* 191 n. 3] Responsibility produces or maintains the psyche’s *signifyingness* in face of the expansive ego. And, concomitantly, is able to respond to ‘the plot of what appears in the face of another [*Autrui*’] [*OtB* 97]. The ‘philosopher’ can avoid this epiphany [*OtB* 95], but thereby commits themselves to egoist fate<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> ‘The self involved in maintaining oneself, losing oneself or finding oneself again is not a result, but the very matrix (*matrice*) of the relations or events that these pronomial verbs express.’ [*OtB* 104] Here the maternal metaphor, *matrice* also meaning ‘womb’, is fully intended.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. *Being and Time* where individuation is achieved through appreciation of the *Jemeinigkeit* of death. As Lingis observes, through this singularizing the individual is delivered from the ‘anonymity and indifference of being’ [*OtB* xxvi].

<sup>43</sup> ‘To be without a choice can seem to be violence only to an abusive or hasty and imprudent reflection, for it precedes the freedom non-freedom couple, but thereby sets up a vocation that goes beyond the limited and egoist fate of him who is only for-himself, and washes his hand of



Levinas explicitly rejects any understanding of the psyche in terms of the unconscious, which he sees as still participating in the play of consciousness and the dominance of being, though he tends to interpret psychoanalysis as *psychotherapy* which attempts to cure the sick subject [*OtB* 194 fn. 6]<sup>44</sup>. Since the psyche, is already a ‘psychosis’ [*OtB* 142] (the ‘maddened subject channels transcendence’ [*Enigma* 67]), one can anticipate his anxiety on this score. Yet somehow, the self is the defeat of the ego’s identity and, at the same time, a unique structure that does not reduce to consciousness<sup>45</sup>.

The key term, generally recognised as being introduced in this work, is ‘hostage’. Rather than the ‘host’ who welcomes the Other into the dwelling and offers hospitality, the ‘hostage’ names the passive structure of substitution: ‘... the sacrifice of a hostage designated who has not chosen himself to be hostage, but possibly elected by the Good, in an involuntary election not assumed by the elected one.’ [*OtB* 15] This passivity is understood as an inversion of Being’s conatus and ruse [*OtB* 75], ‘the-one-for-the-other’ of substitution ‘derogates from the finality of the interestedness of man inhabiting the world’ [*OtB* 94]. While still signifying through generosity, the other is no longer the one before whom I justify myself in discourse nor does it depend on a prior consistency or identity. This new giving is repeatedly framed in the following formulations: ‘to take the bread out of one’s own mouth’, ‘to nourish the hunger of another with one’s own fasting’ [*OtB* 56]. We should stress that this is not giving from surfeit, but depriving myself ‘not in order to have the merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one’s heart’ [*OtB* 72] to give jealously and always have more to give [*OtB* 84].

In a gloss on Marxism, Levinas believes that this exposure is more fundamental than the passivity and alienation inflicted upon the labouring classes:

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the faults and misfortunes that do not begin in his own freedom or in his present. It is the setting up of a being that is not for itself, but is for all, is both being and disinterestedness.’ [*OtB* 116]

<sup>44</sup> Compare the reference to Foucault in ‘Enigma and Phenomenon’ [*Enigma* 178 fn. 5].

<sup>45</sup> It might then be asked, how far it is a ‘discovery’ and how far a ‘creation’?



‘This passivity is, to be sure, an exposedness of the subject to another, but the passivity of the subject is more passive still than that which the oppressed one determined to struggle undergoes. The most passive, unassumable, passivity, the subjectivity, of the very subjection of the subject, is due to my being oppressed with responsibility for the oppressed who is other than myself. ... It is because my passivity as a subject, my exposedness to the other is physical pain itself that I can be exploited; it is not because I am exploited that my exposure to the other is absolutely passive, that is, excludes all assumption, is despite myself.’ [OtB 55]

The passivity of exposure undercuts the earlier analysis, from *Totality and Infinity*, of need and underdeveloped humanity. Levinas nods to this difference in a footnote where he marks the contrast with his new analysis of sensibility as signifying in proximity: ‘In *Totality and Infinity* the sensible was interpreted in the sense of consumption and enjoyment.’ [OtB 191 n.8]. Consumption and enjoyment were fundamental to the formation of the separated ego, whereas responsibility is now premised upon a ‘de-coring’ [*dénucléation*] of the ego. The other now inspires *pain* that prompts the taking on of the infinitely increasing debt of responsibility in substitution. The unrecoverable wound of proximity attacks the complacency of the ego in its enjoyment, but this signifyingness gains its meaning from this very opposition to the ego’s need for enjoyment [OtB 73-4]. Here is the specifically human, penitent possibility rather than the possibility of suicide, ‘Not in elevated feeling, in “belles lettres” but as in a tearing away of bread from the mouth that tastes it, to give it to the other.’ [OtB 64]

In this recurrence of debt and substitution in this approach to the other, the me become substantial in ipseity<sup>46</sup>. The impossibility of evading these commitments in its repetition generates the psyche. This is held to be a new mode of infinity producing ‘inwardness’:

‘To be oneself as in the trace of one’s exile is to be as a pure withdrawal from oneself, and, as such, an inwardness. Inwardness is not at all like a way of disposing of private matters. This inwardness without secrets is a pure witness to the inordinateness which already commands me, to give to the other taking the bread out of my own mouth, and making a gift of my own skin.’ [OtB 138]

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<sup>46</sup> See Lingis’s ‘Introduction’ [OtB xxii-xxiii].



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Opposed to good ‘conscience’, this responsibility requires a necessary iteration of exposure [*OtB* 153] and thus gains *ipseity*. This is again a form of bootstrapping, or ‘levitation’. Responsibility increases in proportion to the degree of substitution – there is no horizon that brings such demand to an end. Substitution, or the taking on of responsibilities, produces a recurrence of self that is neither intentional nor understood in terms of the traditional categories of altruism, benevolence, or love [*OtB* 111]<sup>47</sup>.

This is Levinas’s understanding of *ipseity* – a formation of self through the *accusative*, in contrast to Kant’s recognition of the ego. He argues that the ‘aging subject’ cannot reckon on identification of ego with itself, since it depends on consciousness and memory, but that it would still be unique through the substitutions arrogated or the persecutions directed against it. In this way, another order is produced that does not reduce to that of being [*Enigma* 71]. This ipseity is not reciprocal or reciprocated: ‘To accuse the innocence of the other, to ask of the other more than he owes, is criminal.’ [*OtB* 195 fn. 18].

I gain my identity through others without dialectical recuperation of the self’s precipitates and this process is without limit: ‘The debt increases in the measure that it is paid.’ [*OtB* 12] To avoid colluding with meaningless being, the diachronous subject and its remainder are interpreted as a debt contracted before freedom. This is the speculative interpretation of fraternity that eludes the theoretical discourses surrounding humanity<sup>48</sup>. This structure is understood as *glory*.

This infinite intensification of indebtedness is not mentioned by Critchley. It is this concept which would be rebarbative to a postmodernist ethics of the Other, since its religious (not to say, “sacred”) dimension seems to have resonances with Bataille’s *potlatch*.

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<sup>47</sup> These all depend on a classical understanding of the operation of the person or will – here, individuation occurs through substitution in the production of an ‘incarnated passivity without reference’ [*OtB* 112].

<sup>48</sup> ‘My substitution for another is the trope of a sense that does not belong to the empirical order of psychological events, an *Einfühlung* or a compassion which signify by virtue of this sense.’ [*OtB* 125]



'The recurrence in the subject is thus neither freedom of possession of self by self in reflection, nor the freedom of play ... It is a matter of an exigency coming from the other, beyond what is available to my powers, to open an unlimited "deficit," in which the self spends itself without counting, freely. ... Essence ... fills every interval of nothingness that would interrupt it. It is a strict-booking where nothing is lost or created.' [*OtB* 125]

But in many ways, it is a moment of extreme assertion, which can barely be discussed as philosophy at all (in an endnote, Levinas calls 'substitution' the 'hagiography of society' [*OtB* 193 fn. 33]). As Levinas himself notes, the very idea 'appears demented to the order of contemplation'. It is worth then considering the multiple references to Plotinus, which appear to operate as a kind of argument from authority: the conception of such a Good was once part of philosophical discourse [*OtB* 95, 118]<sup>49</sup>.

Exemplified by Abraham's '*me voici*', 'I am here', it marks a responsibility 'answering for everything and for everyone' [*OtB* 114], responsible even for the 'persecuting by the persecutor' [*OtB* 75], that signifies through giving [*OtB* 50]. *Me voici* sloganizes the practice of substitution through which Levinas claims 'ontological categories are transformed into ethical categories' [*OtB* 115], which as a form of inspiration is the very psyche formed though and for the other. A 'substantiality' produced not through self-positing but *exposure*, opposed to apology through which 'consciousness regains control' [*OtB* 102]<sup>50</sup>.

### The Glory of the Infinite

In this form of recurrence of substitution, as a new form of infinity, Levinas believes himself to have evaded the traditional problems associated with the infinite. He asserts that the infinite here is not a 'figure of negative theology', since 'all negative traits become positive in responsibility' [*OtB* 12]. As response to the infinite, responsibility produces the infinite in the 'witness borne'

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<sup>49</sup> See also 'Enigma and Phenomenon' [*Enigma*. 178 fn. 4. & *Enigma* 179 fn. 25]. In 'Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity', Levinas writes: '... we believe we are following a tradition at least as ancient, that which does not read right in might and does not reduce every other to the same. ... the tradition of the other is not necessarily religious ... it is philosophical.' [op.cit. p. 53].

<sup>50</sup> See also Visker *Truth and Singularity* p. 271.



in the formation of the psyche: 'I am commanded by my own mouth' [*OtB* 147]<sup>51</sup>.

There are several moves here, not all of them foregrounded by Levinas. Where did the interpretation of diachrony as infinite come from? It is possible to follow Levinas in his account of the *infinition* of responsibility as a 'glorious increase of obligation'<sup>52</sup>. But it is not clear how this responsibility is understood to *respond* to a pre-given Infinite, nor how such infinition is not the *indefinite* increase of responsibility.

Although the thematic substructure has changed, the *face* still plays the key role here. It cannot signify the Idea of the Infinite in the Cartesian manner described in *Totality and Infinity*, as an idea coming from *without* that leads to desire for the exterior<sup>53</sup>. The face *obsesses* and marks the commencement of the 'plot of infinity' [*OtB* 193 fn. 31], but this obsession is a response to destitution, not mastery or height. This destitution connects to the wound or command at the heart of the diachronic temporalization of the subject: the face bears a *trace of the past*. 'The trace of a past in a face is not the absence of a yet non-revealed, but the anarchy of what has never been present, of an infinite which commands in the face of the other, and which, like an excluded middle, could not be aimed at.' [*OtB* 97]

As noted by Derrida, the 'trace' did not have a systematic place in *Totality and Infinity*, but assumes a more central role in the works that come afterwards. The trace operates as a term to indicate an essential non-phenomenality or enigmatic givenness. Firstly, the face is not a countenance nor does the neighbour appear

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<sup>51</sup> 'The Infinite does not appear to him that bears witness to it. On the contrary the witness belongs to the glory of the Infinite. It is by the voice of the witness that the glory of the Infinite is glorified.' [*OtB* 146]

<sup>52</sup> 'The more I answer the more I am responsible: the more I approach the neighbour with which I am encharged the further away I am. This debit which increases is infinity as an infinition of the infinite, as glory.' [*OtB* 93]

<sup>53</sup> 'The exposure to the other is not something added to the one to bring it from the inward to the outside.' [*OtB* 56]



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in the face: as image all proximity would be annulled [*OtB* 91]. The neighbour does not have a form, its face marks the collapse of phenomenality [*OtB* 87-88]<sup>54</sup>.

‘A face is not an appearance of sign of some reality, which would be personal like it is, but dissimulated or expressed by the physiognomy, and which would present itself as an invisible theme. The essential of the thesis here expounded is not any kind of conjunction of themes, is not a structure formed by their superposition. A face does not function in proximity as a sign of a hidden God who would impose the neighbour on me. It is a trace of itself, a trace in the trace of an abandon, where the equivocation is never dissipated. It obsesses the subject without staying in correlation with him, without equalling me in a consciousness, ordering me before appearing, in the glorious increase of obligation.’ [*OtB* 93-94]

In this redescription of diachrony in the ‘ethical language’ of the trace<sup>55</sup>, phenomenological methodology is supplanted. Abandonment and destitution, the desolation of the trace, are also riven by an obsession which can be never be correlated in consciousness or representation or assembled into presence, but is not reducible to nothingness [*Enigma* 179 n. 14]. This is its enigma: ‘... this trace of infinity shows itself enigmatically, like a blinking light. But this new plot does not remain in a negative theology. Its positive character still leads us to the notion of substitution.’ [*OtB* 193 n. 31]

But what justifies this equation between the disjunction (or non-correlation) and the Infinite? Levinas stresses that the trace is an ‘insinuation’ that requires a ‘private convocation’: ‘... unless we retain it, it has already withdrawn. ... It remains only for him who would take it up. Otherwise, it has already restored the order it troubled ...’ [*Enigma* 70] It is always possible to doubt it.

‘It is up to *me* to retain or to repel this God without boldness, exiled because allied with the conquered, hunted down and hence absolute, thus disarticulating the very moment in which he is presented and proclaimed, unrepresentable. This way the Other has of seeking my recognition while

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<sup>54</sup> ‘What sort of signalling could he send before me which would not strip him of his exclusive alterity? Absolving himself from all essence, all genus, all resemblance, the neighbor, *the first one on the scene*, concerns me for the first time (even if he is an old acquaintance, an old friend, an old lover, long caught up in the fabric of my social relations) in a contingency that excludes the a priori.’ [*OtB* 86]

<sup>55</sup> ‘The mode in which a face indicates its own absence in my responsibility requires a description that can be formed only in ethical language.’ [*OtB* 94]



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preserving his *incognito* ... we call enigma ... contrasting it with the indiscreet and victorious appearing of a *phenomenon*.' [Enigma 70]

I intend the echo from the first chapters to resonate. Again, the answer is only the subject's responsibility justifies this inflection of the trace, which is a 'withdrawal where no actuality had preceded' [OtB 140]. The exteriority of the Infinite is a 'revelation made by the one who receives it ... by the inspired subject whose inspiration, alterity in the same, is the subjectivity or psyche of the subject' [OtB 156]. The Infinite is glorified and produced only through subjectivity [OtB 148], but at the same time, the non-egoistic subject is manifested only through this infinitude of responsibility<sup>56</sup>: 'The subject is born in the beginninglessness of an anarchy and in the endlessness of obligation, gloriously augmenting as though infinity came to pass in it [*comme si en elle l'infini se passait*].' [OtB 140, AqE 239]

Responsibility does not collapse into being, but at the same time, it avoids a collapse into nothingness – it is intended to break the exclusive disjunction between being and not being, but this means that its 'infinite' is of another order: indefinite but not the indefinite extension of the real.

'Beyond the bad infinity of the *Sollen* it [responsibility] increases infinitely, living infinity, an obligation more and more strict in the measure that obedience progresses and the distance to be crossed untransversable in the measure that one approaches. The giving then shows itself to be a parsimony, the exposure a reserve, and holiness guilt. It is life without death, the life of the Infinite or its glory, a life outside of essence and nothingness.' [OtB 142 translation corrected]

On this question of the bad infinite there is an extended reference to Hegel in a footnote:

'Hegel thus formulates the bad infinite: "Something becomes an other: this other is itself somewhat; therefore it likewise becomes an other, and so on *ad infinitum*. This *Infinity* is the wrong or negative infinity; it is only a negation of a finite: but the finite rises again the same as ever, and is never got rid of and absorbed." ... In the situation we have described the other

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<sup>56</sup> 'The infinite does not signal itself to a subjectivity, a unity already formed, by its order to turn toward the neighbour. In its *being* subjectivity undoes the *essence* by substituting itself for another.' [OtB 13]



does not become likewise an other; the end is not reborn, but moves off, at each new stage of the approach, with all the alterity of the other.' [*OtB* 193 fn. 34]

Lingis's translation, no longer following his earlier convention, elides the movement in the final sentence between *l'Autre* and *l'Autrui*.

*'Dans la situation décrite, l'Autre ne devient pas pareillement un Autre; le fin ne renaît pas, mais s'éloigne, à chaque nouvelle étape de l'approche, de toute l'altérité d'Autrui.'* [*AqE* 149 fn. 1]

At each stage of approach, the infinite alterity of the Other is respected, it is not encompassed by the substitution nor is it approached by degrees: it is not aiming at an end. Responsibility increases infinitely but not so as to overlap the infinite alterity of the other. In this regard, one can see Levinas's objections to theology which attempt to thematize that infinite alterity or present a 'world behind the scenes' [*OtB* 5]. The approach repeatedly reinscribes the infinite distance: *an-archic* in that no principle governs it<sup>57</sup>. Visker has argued that this formulation does indeed avoid the problems associated with the bad infinite: '... the other's alterity is for Levinas, absolute in a different sense and *less* or *differently* absolute than the absoluteness of the bad infinite.'<sup>58</sup> "God" and the "Infinite" become unsettled by this opposition to being and principle and instead only serve as placeholders for a practical orientation that attempts to re-animate a religious tradition<sup>59</sup>.

'The revelation of the beyond being is perhaps indeed but a word, but this "perhaps" belongs to an ambiguity in which the anarchy of the Infinite resists the univocity of an originary or a principle. It belongs to an ambiguity or an ambivalence and an inversion which is stated in the word God, the *apex* of vocabulary, admission of the stronger than me in me and of the "less than nothing," nothing but an abusive word, a beyond themes in a thought that does not yet think or thinks more than it thinks.' [*OtB* 156]

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<sup>57</sup> 'The infinite "presents" itself anarchically, but thematization loses the anarchy which alone can accredit it.' [*OtB* 197 n. 25]

<sup>58</sup> *Truth and Singularity* p. 237 fn. 5.

<sup>59</sup> 'But to hear a God not contaminated by Being is a human possibility no less important and no less precarious than to bring Being out of the oblivion in which it is said to have fallen in metaphysics and in onto-theology.' [*OtB* xlii]



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That is, Levinas argues that no proof could be offered for this assertion or postulation of infinity – the Infinite would be belied in proof of its transcendence [OtB 152]. In this context, he introduces a reference to prophecy akin to that made in *Totality and Infinity*. Of necessity, prophecy can appear and be taken simply as ‘information circulating’; the trace of glory can be effaced simply in its appearance in the form of a statement. This raises the problem of voluntarism – does it *only* exceed information through the *decision* to read it as a sign of a transcendent possibility?

‘We call prophecy this reverting in which the perception of an order coincides with the signification of this order *made* by the one that obeys it [*cet ordre faite par celui qui y obéit*].’ [OtB 149, AqE 233 my emphasis translation modified]

Lingis had originally translated ‘*faite*’ as ‘given’ (possibly because the sentiment is so extreme, or appears to undercut the claim to the Infinite). But this ‘bootstrapping’ infinite is non-dogmatic and a-theological, and hence maintains itself within a philosophical terrain. The Infinite is not posited as existing externally, independent of its production by the subject in responsibility and sincerity.

‘Language would exceed the limits of thought, by suggesting, letting be understood without ever making understandable, an implication of a meaning distinct from that which comes to signs from the simultaneity of systems or the logical definition of concepts. The possibility is laid bare in the poetic said, and the interpretation it calls for ad infinitum. It is shown in the prophetic said, scorning its conditions in a sort of *levitation*.’ [OtB 169-170, my emphasis]

This levitation finds its justification in the manner in which there is produced a break from being, systems and conatus. A humanism rather than a brute existence. Levinas’s poetic intent produces yet another synonym in the form of a neologism. *Illeity* names ‘God’ without divine characteristics [OtB 162] – it inaugurates a religion that maintains the enigma and distance of the infinite in the



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face [*OtB* 12]<sup>60</sup>. In so doing, it de-sacralizes the notion of the creature made in God's image<sup>61</sup>.

'It is in prophecy that the Infinite escapes the objectification of thematization and of dialogue, and signifies as *illeity*, in the third person. This "thirdness" is different from that of the third man, it is the third party that interrupts the face to face of a welcome of the other man, interrupts the proximity or approach of the neighbour, it is the third man with which justice begins.' [*OtB* 150]

Illeity as a form of 'thirdness' gives content to a notion of fraternity that exceeds *Einfühlung* in that it demands to be produced – it is not given. But that form of 'thirdness' is distinct from *le tiers*, the third party who interrupts the face to face.

The generalization of this structure is glossed as the 'birth of meaning in the obtuseness of being' [*OtB* 128], or alternatively, as the possibility of *expiation*. Accepted as a premature thought early in the book [*OtB* 14], by the climax, Levinas writes: 'Expiation occurs in the last analysis with the extraordinary and diachronic reversal of the same into the other, in inspiration and the psyche.' [*OtB* 146]. Expiation is held to occur by transforming the 'everydayness' of fellow feeling from a transcendental structure of subjectivity *into* a transcendent possibility to be realised.

At this superstructural level of orientation or aim, the themes from *Totality and Infinity* persist. But they take on a new form, radical generalisation of responsibility through the form of the nazirate supplants apology. The latter is more palatable to contemporary thought. Robert Bernasconi has commented on the 'impossible demands' placed on the individual through such practices; it 'would be to condemn oneself to a form of madness'<sup>62</sup>. In their exorbitance, they challenge received ethical meaning – indeed, Levinas holds that such 'ethics' forms the 'glorious augmentation' of 'holy' subjectivity. 'How do such phrases

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<sup>60</sup> 'It is the trace of a relationship with illeity that no unity of apperception grasps, ordering me to responsibility. This relationship is religion, exceeding the psychology of faith and of the loss of faith.' [*OtB* 168]

<sup>61</sup> cf. Visker *Truth and Singularity* p. 136.

<sup>62</sup> 'The Ethics of Suspicion', p. 10.



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function in Levinas's writings? How could he employ them unless he was untouched by the hermeneutics of suspicion?'<sup>63</sup>

Yet we have already seen that, in the purity of responsibility for the other, Levinas believes he has the base-line approach that is free from all ideological considerations, *since it is free from consciousness and the conatus of being, where conatus is understood as ego-preservation and advancement*. That such responsibility is meant is incontestable:

'The subjectivity of the subject is persecution and martyrdom.' [*OtB* 146]

'To support the world is a crushing charge, but a divine discomfort. It is better than the merits and faults and sanctions proportionate to the freedom of one's choices.' [*OtB* 122]

Responsibility escapes the 'ennui' of the ego, who can only play distracting games in a world free of meaning [*OtB* 124]. It certainly worth remembering that Levinas here draws on several historical precedents in both the Christian and Judaic tradition. Ascetic practices of the self were part of our cultural world – fasting, mortification and penance still play a role in Catholicism. One can consider the anchorite tradition – not simply hermits, but including figures such as Simon Stylites. Even within the modern philosophical tradition, one can recall Kierkegaard's insistence on the difficulty of 'becoming a Christian' in the modern world that has forgotten the demands of faith. To recall a Jewish legacy, it is worth consulting Scholem on the practices of penitence of the Hasidic *baal teshuvah*<sup>64</sup>. The Hasidic systematization of penance reached a form previously unknown in Judaism by understanding the soul itself as an act of penitence<sup>65</sup>. Fasting played the central role but there are also accounts of practitioners sitting with their bare feet in ice for one hour daily<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> See Gershom G. Scholem *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition [1946] (New York, Schocken Books, 1974).

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.* p. 78.

<sup>66</sup> Scholem: 'Here we are undoubtedly faced with the after-effects of a Christian influence. The whole system of penitence, particularly in the codified form given to it by Eleazar of Worms in several of his writings, closely corresponds to the practices prescribed by the early medieval Church in its literature on the subject ...' [*ibid.* p. 104]



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‘... when the righteous one makes himself an offering for sin he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand; he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one make many be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities ... because he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.’ Isaiah 53, 10-12

Scholem notes that from this passage, the Hasidim developed the belief that the truly just suffer for their whole generation<sup>67</sup>: a belief that became enshrined in the folk tradition of the *Lamedvovnik*: the thirty-six hidden just men who justify the world before God<sup>68</sup>: ‘were it not for them, God would annihilate the whole of mankind’<sup>69</sup>.

Levinas’s aim in *Otherwise than Being* is to incorporate a much more radical religious sensibility into philosophy. Philosophy, as phenomenology, comes to perceive the break-up of consciousness in the diachrony of the present [*OtB* 165], and also provides an ethical language to express the paradox of phenomenology [*OtB* 121]: this language designates the approach and is also able to criticise the reification of the laws of the city [*OtB* 165]. But the ‘rendings of the logical text’ are not to be ‘mended by logic alone’ [*OtB* 170]. The history of the West ‘bears traces in its margins of events carrying another signification’ – one which might truly distinguish humanity from animality: ‘One has to find for me another kinship than that which ties him to being, one that will perhaps enable us to conceive of this difference between me and the other, this inequality, in a sense absolutely opposed to oppression.’ [*OtB* 177] The nazirate is a fast for others, without seeking reciprocation.

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<sup>67</sup> There may be further profit in considering Levinas ‘religion’ in light of the Hasidic belief in *devekut* – the transformation of the profane into the holy sphere ‘begins with the decision to cleave to God’: an obsession that needs to be mitigated. See Scholem ‘Devekut, or communion with God’ in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and other essays on Jewish Spirituality* (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1971), pp. 205-27. See also, Putnam’s discussion of *mitzvot* in ‘Levinas and Judaism’.

<sup>68</sup> Scholem considers this belief to be drawn from Islamic influences. ‘The Tradition of the Thirty-Six Hidden Just Men’ in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and other essays on Jewish Spirituality* (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1971), pp. 251-56.

<sup>69</sup> Jorge Luis Borges ‘The Lamed Wufniks’ in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* [1967] translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni revised edition (London, Penguin Books, 1974), p. 90.



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Yet, this nazirate belongs to ‘our’ monotheistic, cultural inheritance which ‘does not recognize ... what is not the highest’, i.e. the non-monotheistic, in ‘open-eyed ignorance’ [*OtB* 177]. With these superstructural constants, we can see that there is still no place to equate Levinas with an ethics of acknowledgement of the other – a transformative idea dominates such that the given could never have the appropriate value. Despite the transformation of the problematic of the other, the idea of the self as *hostage* to the Other depends on a moment of speculative interpretation that exceeds phenomenology. Levinas’s conception of the other still depends on a metaphysics that cannot be evaded – there is no alterity without the ‘religion’ that allows the Infinite to come to pass<sup>70</sup>.

### Conclusion

In *Adieu*, Derrida raises explicitly the question of the relation between *Otherwise than Being* and *Totality and Infinity* in relation to the transformation of subject-as-host to the subject-as-hostage:

‘Inseparable from a new conceptual and lexical configuration, from new words or words struck with a new impression (“vulnerability”, “traumatism”, “psychosis”, “accusation”, “persecution”, “obsession”, etc.), “substitution” carries forth quite continuously, it seems to me, the élan and the “logic” of *Totality and Infinity*, though it dislodges even more drastically the primacy of intentionality ...’ [*Adieu* 56] [my italics]

Levinas now grounds ethical subjectivity in sensibility itself, which is expressed by the concept of ‘proximity’. Whereas before the experience of mastery was the mark of the exteriority of the Other, here the other is an alterity already effecting sensibility itself. And while on the surface this might seem to meet understandable suspicions about the applicability of the Other from *Totality and Infinity*, it does not meet the problem of justification. Whereas previously only those who were encountered through height fell under the category of Other, in *Otherwise than Being*, the category has been expanded to include more than masters and teachers. But this apparently equitable development renders the *religious* humanism of the work more suspect, whilst failing to meet the queries regarding the status of the infinite and the ideological function of the work

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Visker *Truth and Singularity* pp. 257-58.



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overall. Without the guard-rail of Husserl's refutation of psychologism and the phenomenological method which depends upon it, the metaphysical systematics of Levinas are open to the reservations which are produced by alternative systematics. Levinas's metaphysics has become even more uncritical.

If we wish to pursue the question of 'influence' here, then we should observe that Derrida's impact is located more in the break with egoity and the focus on diachrony, than on the introduction of the saying and the said, which in any case, does not meet the demands of critical philosophical presentation. The persistent implicit references to Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry' in *Otherwise than Being* suggest that it is Derrida's introductory essay, with its break-up of Living Presence in delay and dehiscence, that had more of an impact than 'Violence and Metaphysics'.

In the following chapter, we will examine two essays that form an exchange between Derrida and Levinas. We will see that this pair contrast markedly and in no way form a dialogue. At issue is the possibility of making a claim for *transcendence* from the everyday experience of *responsibility*.



## Chapter Five

### The Metaphysical Stand-off

At the beginning of the last chapter, we presented certain objections to Simon Critchley's characterisation of deconstruction as *clôtural* writing. We noted that this idea of a doubled writing – first producing a detailed, faithful commentary and then opening this commentary up by focusing on moments of ellipsis and slippage was monolithic and developed abstractly without reference either to the *variety* of Derrida's writings or the philosophical backdrop to those writings.

To insist on the distinction between deconstruction and critique without examining the different forms of critique in modern philosophy (Kantian, Benjaminian, Frankfurt immanent, etc.) forces us to ask whether critique (or *Kritik*) has been confused with a more general, everyday understanding of criticism *qua* approval or disapproval. Undecidability ought not to be interpreted such that any point of disputation is suspended. If it marks a meta-level thesis about the impossibility of grounding meaning via reference to intention, origin or telos (whilst also resisting the subsumption of philosophy to empirical sciences), then it challenges Levinas's teleological, strategical imposition of the idea on being. Derrida not only has a very different conception of what is demanded of a *philosophical presentation* but also in no way shares Levinas's conception of metaphysics (and consequently either history or politics). Given our presentation of Levinas's *speculative* system, this is of central importance and disrupts any understanding of influence.

The concern in this chapter is to further break the critical unanimity surrounding the relationship of Derrida and Levinas. Here, I examine two essays: Levinas's 'Wholly Otherwise' and Derrida's 'At this Very Moment in This Work Here I Am'. Both Critchley and Bernasconi base their argument for an "affinity" between Levinas and Derrida on these essays. I will argue that they have failed to attend sufficiently closely to these texts in their eagerness to demonstrate their theses. 'Wholly Otherwise' and 'At this Very Moment ...' should be read as re-statements of position *against each other*.



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Tracing these points of disagreement regarding Levinas's philosophical presentation urges Derrida into novel contortions as he demonstrates the inability of certain key metaphors to do the work Levinas intends, so that the distinction between the Saying and the Said is undermined. In contesting Critchley and Bernasconi's readings, we will also interleave Hobson's reading of this second Derrida essay on Levinas. Marked by a much more profound and accurate engagement with the *writing* of the essay, it allows us to see the manner in which Levinas is worked into a palimpsest.

### 'Wholly Otherwise'

'Wholly Otherwise' has been cited by Simon Critchley as an example of an 'ethical reading of deconstruction' [ED 11]; a "double-handed" reading which both highlights Derrida's dependence on the metaphysical tradition, but also allows something beyond the metaphysical tradition to be discerned darkly [ED 145]. The essay is notable for its strange introduction which contains a double analogy prompted by Derrida's work. To my own eye, this essay is a re-statement of position contra Derrida: its demarcation lines laid out to emphasise the *crossing* of paths, rather than the encounter, of the *chiasmus* evoked in the subtitle to its final section.

Compared to Critchley, my reading is pessimistic and deflationary. It emphasises the framing device of the rhetorical question and the characterisation of Derrida's project as *creaturely*. The philosophical disagreement between Levinas and Derrida centres on the interpretation of the sign and the signified. Does Derrida's work, asks Levinas, 'cut into Western thinking' in a manner similar to Kant's differentiation between dogmatic and critical philosophy [WhO 3]? Let us emphasise that Levinas does not settle this question (a strategy we have seen before in his writing). Instead, we are presented with an admission that Derrida produces a timely 'awareness of the difficulty of thinking'. However, for Levinas this is insufficient: 'In the meantime we walk in a "no man's land", in an in-between which is uncertain even of the uncertainties which flicker everywhere. Suspension of truths!' [WhO 3] The 'precise texts which are



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so strange' of Derrida practise the *epochē* of Husserlian phenomenology yet do not reconstruct on apodictic certainty. 'At the start everything is in its place, and then, at the end of a few pages, or paragraphs, under the effects of a formidable questioning, nothing is left for thought to dwell in. This is, beyond the philosophical scope of propositions, a purely literary effect, a new *frisson*, the poetry of Derrida.' [WhO 4]

How are we to understand this re-description of Derrida as a poet or one who produces a *frisson* of literary effect? We know that this is not of itself structured by a simple opposition of literature to philosophy, since Blanchot, as so often, is cited less than two pages later. Is it meant to echo Derrida's celebrated footnote [VM 398 fn. 7], already cited, about the rhetorical force of waves striking the beach that leave 'a work of art, not a treatise'? Levinas, too, raises the question of the non-philosophical (and perhaps more pointedly, the *task* of philosophy which is to produce more than *frisson*). We could take this phrase as a gloss for the double analogy that follows immediately:

'This is, beyond the philosophical scope of propositions, a purely literary effect, a new *frisson*, the poetry of Derrida. When I read him, I always recall the exodus of 1940. A retreating military unit arrives in an as yet unsuspecting locality, where the cafés are open, where the ladies visit the "ladies' fashion store," where the hairdressers dress hair and bakers bake; where viscounts meet other viscounts and tell each other stories of viscounts, and where, an hour later, everything is *deconstructed and devastated*: houses closed up or left with their doors open, emptied of their occupants who are swept along in a current of cars and pedestrians, through roads restored to their "former glory" as roads when, in an immemorial past, they were traced by great migrations. In these in-between days, a symbolic episode: somewhere *in between* Paris and Alençon, a half-drunk barber used to invite soldiers who were passing on the road to come and have a free shave in his shop; the "lads" ... he used to call them in a patriotic language which soared above the waters or floated up from the chaos. With his two companions he shaved them free of charge – and it was today [*ce fut aujourd'hui*]. The essential procrastination – *the future différance* – was reabsorbed into the present. Time came to its end with the end or the interim period of France. Unless the barber was as delirious as the fourth form of delirium described in the *Phaedrus*, in which, since Plato, the discourse of Western metaphysics has remained.' [WhO 4] [my italics]

Does Derrida recall the exodus of 1940? Does he need to be reminded of it? Perhaps some people have lived through events that mean that they have already awakened from slumber? These questions cannot be resolved from within this



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text. However, this does mean that it is an ambiguous, perhaps back-handed rather than ‘double-handed’ analogy, that compares the effects of Derrida’s texts to the arrival of retreating units that *deconstruct and devastate the town*: ‘philosophy as defeat’ [*WhO* 4].

This in-between, ‘purged of ontic resonance, liberated from the alternative of truth and falsehood’ [*WhO* 3] is a no-man’s land – the enemy has not yet arrived. This in-between produces the half-drunk barber<sup>1</sup> who offers that sign of the deferred utopia today. As Critchley notes, the reference to a free shave informs a French idiom which could be compared to the English expression, “Jam tomorrow!”. *Demain on rase gratis ... ce fut aujourd’hui!* Tomorrow’s jam today! The sign of utopia is here, today, in the fleeing panic of retreat. I hand over to Critchley:

‘That Levinas should apply this image to Derrida shows that he considers that the *impossible* takes place in his work. ... Levinas is obliquely hinting that the futural movement of *différance*, its temporization, which always defers the fulfilment, or *parousia*, of presence, is reabsorbed into the present, thereby fissuring the latter and usurping its authority.’ [*ED* 153-4]

But could we not read this otherwise? For does not this interpretation bracket off the recent history that is the context for the barber’s actions? Is not the free shave, *le rase gratis*, the sign of a future arrived, transformed by its arrival in this context? Isn’t Levinas rather suggesting that the end of the metaphysics of presence, the mark of the arrival of a new thinking, arrives in a no-man’s land of terrifying uncertainties? The dismantling of authority is to be feared if it can produce nothing that resists the onward march of barbarism. Here, Derrida is allied with Heidegger – the repetition of the road’s “former glory” a sly aside – this too is no cause for confidence, no sign of resolute authenticity. In one of his late essays on Husserl, written in 1974, he described deconstruction as the ‘rearguard action’ of a philosophy in retreat that is unable to find any meaning other than that of the ontic<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida? Or Derrideans, ‘... those who – dreadfully well-informed, prodigiously intelligent, and more Derridean than Derrida – interpret his extraordinary work with the assistance of all the key-words at once, without having or leaving time to return to the thinking of which these words are contemporary.’ [*WhO* 6]

<sup>2</sup> Levinas ‘Philosophy and Awakening’ [1977] *DEwH* 169-79; p. 170.



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Levinas's closing ironic, Platonic alternative determines the tone – gentle mockery. In his second section, whose title *Le Passe-temps* is again double-edged, he swiftly details the problems accruing to deconstruction as compared to his own thinking of the relation of the Infinite to Being.

'The defection from presence led up to the defection from the true, to significations which do not have to comply with the summation of Knowledge. Truth is no longer at the level of an eternal or omnitemporal truth – but this [deconstruction] is a relativity that no historicism would ever have been able to suspect. A deportation or drifting of Knowledge, even beyond the skepticism which remained in love with the truth, even if it felt incapable of embracing it. Henceforth, significations do not converge on the truth – truth's no great matter! Being won't be able to go the whole way: its bankrupt way of life demands new respites, a recourse to signs in the midst of a presence that steals away from itself; but only other signs are produced in the signified of these signs. ... A system of signs is liberated, a language guided by no full meaning, signifiers without a signified. Différance is thus said by way of a dissemination in which presence is deconstructed, a postponement without limits to be respected, which time is, or, more precisely, which pass-time [*passe-temps*, which could be rendered as 'pastime' in English] itself is. A *play* in the interstices of Being where the centers of gravitation are not the same as those of the world. But are there centers? Is there gravitation? Is there? [*Y a-t-il?*] Everything is otherwise if one can still speak of Being.' [*WhO* 5]

Why has this passage escaped Critchley's attention? It seems clear enough: these are familiar complaints against deconstruction. It's all a play of signs without referents, reference or meaning!<sup>3</sup> Note the closing sentence of this paragraph – it gives Levinas his title: my work is 'wholly otherwise' because one can still speak of Being. There is nothing in this text to suggest that this is not Levinas speaking without restraint. Indeed, even in texts where the reference to Derrida is more positive, this positive ascription is restricted; Derrida's insight into Being as *logocentric* is co-opted by comparing two paths: the path that leads to knowledge and *play* [*jeu*], or the path 'that signifies infinity'<sup>4</sup>. What is at issue is an *arrested* thinking 'that reasons upon signs as signifieds' (Derrida), the self-dislocating

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Hobson [*OL* 60].

<sup>4</sup> 'But philosophy, as an extreme lucidity, still correlative with being and expressed in a language that Derrida calls logocentric, is already unsaying itself. In its said, the paths that lead to knowledge and presentation, on the one hand, are distinguished from the path that – otherwise than being or before the *essence of being* – signifies the Infinity [sic] of the other. A distinction that remains an enigma and dia-chrony.' From Consciousness to Wakefulness [*A partir de Husserl*] [1974] in *DEwH* 153-68; p. 196 fn 31.



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play of the world [cf. *VM* 158], versus a thinking for which the sign is ‘the extraordinary event’<sup>5</sup>.

In the following paragraph, Levinas rebuffs Derrida’s extensive, patient reading of ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ with a brief, crude *tu quoque*<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, it mistakes Derrida’s criticism for a rebuttal of scepticism *and* fails to appreciate the problem of Levinas’s ‘nonphilosophical’ *writing*. Against Derrida’s “polemic” he insists on the “truth of truths” in the relationship of Said, Unsaid and Otherwise Said. He explicitly preserves this idea of the ‘truth of truths’ against *différance*:

‘Perhaps the truth of truths does not have the style of verbal dissemination, but it is from the same nonworld (the end of “eternal truths”) of which empiricism and historical relativism can imagine neither the agony nor the figures drawn by their convulsions. It is not therefore absurd that a rigorous reflection lets us catch a glimpse of these interstices of Being where this very reflection unsays itself. One can see nothing without thematization, or without the oblique rays which it reflects back, even when it is a question of the nonthematizable.’ [*WhO* 6]

Let us quickly gloss this passage. Levinas suggests that the ‘truth of truths’ breaks from the ‘dissemination’: it belongs to a different order (and deconstruction appears to be grouped with empiricism and relativism). For Critchley, ‘... Levinas goes on to show that there is a moment of dislocation in deconstruction, where the latter’s ‘rigorous reflection’ also ‘lets us catch a glimpse of these interstices of Being where this very reflection unsays itself’ [*ED* 145]. That is, to say, Levinas performs the double movement which stresses the elliptical, open nature of deconstruction.

But, setting aside the issue of whether deconstruction could make reference to the ‘interstices of Being’, if we examine the above passage from which Critchley draws his supporting sentence, we can see that Levinas is not referring to

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<sup>5</sup> The face *attends* expression and ‘always remains master of the meaning it delivers’ in this fashion it is distinguished from the animal and from plastic forms. ‘Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite’, p. 54.

<sup>6</sup> ‘What remains constructed after the deconstruction is, certainly, the stern architecture of the deconstructing discourse which employs the present tense of the verb “to be” in predicative propositions.’ [*WhO* 5]



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deconstruction, but to his own writing *in contrast to deconstruction*. As he goes on to state, ‘Derrideans’ have *no access* to this ‘subsoil’ of the empirical [WhO 6].

On my reading, ‘Wholly Otherwise’ is a polemical re-statement of position *against* deconstruction. It concludes by positioning Derrida as the thinker of the ‘*Being of the creature*, without recourse to an ontic account of divine operation’ [WhO 7]<sup>7</sup>. This ‘lesser being of the creature’ is deflationary in that it is situated in a plane of radical *inaccess* to truth: language is the a medium, or element, rather than an instrument at the ‘disposal of the speaker’<sup>8</sup>. Such a contrast should be seen as sufficiently fundamental to disbar any immediate, unmediated, or unqualified comparison between Derrida and Levinas.

Again, Levinas raises a pair of rhetorical questions: ‘But is not the attempt at a positive utterance of this failure of presence to itself still a way of returning to the presence with which this positivity merges?... But is there no way out of ontology?’ [WhO 7] Of course, the tacit answer is, yes – my way. Levinas sets up a conception of language that is *empirical* (‘exhausts itself in presence and in the lack of presence’); this he attributes to Derrida. In contrast, he offers his conception premised on the interrelation of Saying and Said. This contrast depends on a crucial disagreement over the interpretation of the *sign*. For Levinas, the sign ‘does not begin as Said’ – this would be merely *creaturely*.

‘... the sign has not grown on the soil of the ontology of the Said in order to receive its paradoxical relational structure from it.... *Like the Saying, the sign is an extra-ordinary event* ... of exposure and subjection to the Other, the event of subjectivity. It’s the one-for-the-other. It’s the signification which does not exhaust itself in simple absence of intuition and presence.’ [WhO 7] [my italics]

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<sup>7</sup> In many ways, this account chimes with George Steiner’s description of Derrideans as ‘faithless Augustinians’. A phrase that perhaps ought to be reclaimed!

<sup>8</sup> The reference to the creature here differs from that found in the essay, ‘From Consciousness to Wakefulness [A *partir de Husserl*]’ [1974]. There the stress is on the human’s place in being as the ‘excluded middle’ that is able to extract itself from being: ‘Should the *otherwise* – nonrepose or nonperdurance in the Same, nonstate – that thus un-says itself from being, be called creature? Perhaps. But on condition that we do not understand it as a lesser being, or as some kind of a modification or derivative of being.’ [DEwH 166] In the context of ‘Wholly Otherwise’, the creaturely marks the outlook that refuses any legitimacy to the beyond.



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What is closed off to ‘deconstructive analysis’ is the idea of interpreting the *surplus* as the ‘better’ coming from beyond. And with that, Levinas signs off, opposing his Cartesian lineage to ‘dissemination’ [WhO 8].

One is startled by the *chutzpah* of a writer who, in a volume devoted to Derrida, can deal with Derrida so cursorily. A crude analysis of this short essay would find that most space is given over to stating his own position and the other part to a questionable reading of Derrida, aligning him with other strands in the history of philosophy (ones Derrida himself opposes). But shouldn’t one be more startled by the current consensus that this is an ‘ethical’ response to Derrida? It is blunt, bad-tempered, knowing, back-handed and really only concerned to promote Levinas above Derrida. Nothing in the text supports Critchley’s positive spin on the opening analogies – the sentences he cites do not praise deconstruction and he has nothing to say about these passages quoted above which repeat familiar critical stories about deconstruction. They are simply ignored. Why does this matter? Firstly, the notion of *clôtural* writing has produced a rose-tinted reading of the relationship between Derrida and Levinas. In its effort to project a certain affinity, it betrays its own avowed fidelity to the text. Secondly, and this we will develop now, it produces a completely different setting for ‘At this Very Moment ...’.

### ‘At this Very Moment ...’

In 1980, Derrida contributed ‘At this very moment ...’ to a *Festschrift* for Levinas. And, he repeats Levinas’s gesture of ingratitude: a re-statement of differences. However, he produces a much more detailed work, and one which can be counted as among the most obscure from Derrida’s output. ‘At this Very Moment ...’ is a very complicated essay, not least with respect to its structure. It appears to be constructed as a dialogue: if one follows a certain typographical convention the dashes ( – ) that open certain paragraphs appear to indicate a change in voice, though it should be noted that Derrida nowhere insists on this textual convention<sup>9</sup>. In addition, the form of the second part of the essay

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. the convention used by Maurice Blanchot in *The Infinite Conversation* [1969] translated by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1991).



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concludes with a free-form, barely intelligible chain of words which appears almost to be a stream of consciousness prayer – though to whom it might be addressed is unclear<sup>10</sup>.

Our concern here is with the first part, a detailed commentary on one particular section from *Otherwise than Being*; a section whose discussion of scepticism has been taken to be a response to Derrida's critique of *Totality and Infinity* in 'Violence and Metaphysics'. It is there that Levinas articulates his break from the language of ontology. It has been argued that, in response, Derrida withdraws aspects of the criticisms made in 'Violence and Metaphysics' by recognising the force of the introduction of the distinction between the Saying and the Said. If this is the case, it is not made explicit; such a reading appears to be based on an unwarranted extrapolation *from one brief passage in this essay*.

Taking my cue from the re-statement of difference in 'Wholly Otherwise', I want to insist on the persistence of a metaphysical dispute between Derrida and Levinas. Levinas's distinction between the Saying and the Said still depends on the binary of two orders: Being and the Beyond Being of the Infinite. Although there is a definite change of register in Derrida's essay, the proponent of *différance* and *arche-writing* engages with Levinas's writing itself. I argue that Derrida deploys a classic deconstructive move in this essay: he interrogates the metaphors employed by Levinas in order to demonstrate the inability of Levinas's metaphysical system to maintain the distinction between Being and that which is Beyond Being. The metaphor of the "retied knot" which serves to illustrate how the interruption of the Said by the Saying can be preserved in the Said of philosophy, disrupts the very possibility of a subject distinguishing between the Saying and the Said *in the first place*.

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<sup>10</sup> In the interview with *Magazine Littéraire* (April, 2003), Derrida indicated that he had attempted to allow a certain feminine voice to speak: '*Elle protestait doucement, mais sans complaisance, contre le privilège androcentrique, voire patriarcal qui laisse tant de marques dans les textes de Lévinas...*'. '[That voice] protested softly, but without complaisance, against the androcentric (even patriarchal) privilege which leaves so many marks in Levinas's texts.' [op. cit. p. 32].



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My presentation will focus on quotations from the text. These will be used to illustrate the *displacement* Derrida's reading performs on Levinas's text. This displacement may be contrasted with the first stage of Critchley's "*clôtural reading*" which is a commentary marked by *fidelity* to the text. Derrida's imposition of the term *sériature* to describe the logic of Levinas's text represents the culmination of this displacement. *Sériature* is not positive ascription – it insists on the movement of series [*série*] and erasure [*rature*] that animates the notion of the retied knot in spite of Levinas's intentions in using the metaphor. As noted by Hobson, Derrida's neonymy is 'often baroque and parodic' [OL 26].

### Language Unbound

Citing a key passage from 'At this Very Moment ...', of a strange withdrawal or reticence on the part of Derrida, Bernasconi writes:

'In any event, far from defending the position he adopted in 1964, Derrida appears to reverse roles with Levinas without a moment's hesitation. No sooner has he posed the question of how Levinas inscribes the wholly other in the language of being – the question which dominates "Violence and Metaphysics" – than Derrida immediately withdraws it: "Shouldn't one reverse the question, in appearance at least, and ask oneself if that language is not *of itself unbound*, hence open to the wholly other, to its own beyond, and in such a way that it is less a matter of exceeding that language than of treating otherwise its own possibilities".'<sup>11</sup>

Critchley follows Bernasconi in orienting his reading around this same sentence. It is important to cite the original Derridean text more fully. This "reversal" is not a *withdrawal* of the original criticisms made in 'Violence and Metaphysics'.

'How does he [Levinas] manage to inscribe or let the wholly other be inscribed within the language of being ... within its syntax and lexicon, under its law? How does he manage to give a place there to what remains absolutely foreign to that medium, absolutely unbound from that language, beyond being ...? Mustn't one reverse the question, at least in appearance, and ask oneself if that language is not *of itself unbound* and hence open to the wholly other, to its own beyond, in such a way that it is less a matter of exceeding that language than of treating it otherwise with its own possibilities?' [ATVM 16-17]

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<sup>11</sup> 'Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy' in *Re-Reading Levinas* edited by Robert Bernasconi & Simon Critchley (London, Athlone Press, 1991), pp. 149-161; p. 156.



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What does “reverse” indicate here? Does it mean that Derrida takes back or retreats from his original questions? Or something quite different? I take it to mean that the question that one asks Levinas – how do you relate to the Beyond in the language of the Same? – assumes a model of language that might not be correct. Why assume that language is bounded, finite, homogeneous and that the Beyond comes from outside language? Couldn’t we instead think of language *itself* as unbounded and *already open* to the other in its iteration and dissemination? Such an interpretation would gel with the ‘deafness’ to the Same and the Other found in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’. Derrida then proceeds to connect this question to the event of the Other – how responsible is Levinas’s discourse in presenting the event of the Other as an event from Beyond and not an event immanent to the very possibilities of language?

To elaborate on this concern, Derrida attends to what Hobson refers to as a ‘token reflexive phrase’: the manner in which a linguistic act attaches to a particular event or thing in space and time [OL 135]. ‘At this very moment ...’ [*en ce moment même*] is used by Levinas in two distinct ways on three occasions within a couple of pages [OtB 167-70]. In the first instance it refers to the saying of the speaker who is able to use language to predicate and organise the said: the animating intentionality that gives meaning<sup>12</sup>: the ‘*en ce moment*’ refers to this presence<sup>13</sup>.

In the third instance, this phrase is used to indicate the tearing of such discursive activity by the other: the failure of synchronization<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Levinas remains a Husserlian in this regard.

<sup>13</sup> ‘But does the reason characteristic of justice, the State, thematization, synchronization, representation, the logos and being succeed in absorbing into its coherence the intelligibility of proximity in which it unfolds? Does not the latter have to be subordinated to the former, since the very discussion which we are pursuing at this moment [*en ce moment*] counts by its said, since in thematizing we are synchronizing the terms, forming a system among them, using the verb to be, placing in being all signification that allegedly signifies beyond being?’ [OtB 167, AqE 260]

<sup>14</sup> ‘The interruptions of the discourse found again and recounted in the immanence of the said are conserved like knots in a thread tied again, the trace of a diachrony that does not enter into the present, that refuses simultaneity.

‘And I still interrupt the ultimate discourse in which all the discourses are stated, in saying it to one that listens to it, and who is situated outside the said that the discourse says, outside all it includes. That is true of the discussion I am here elaborating at this very moment [*en ce moment meme*].’ [OtB 170; AqE 264]



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‘For the first use of the phrase in Levinas points to an act by which language, even in indicating singularity, unique location, undoes the singularity and the uniqueness by reappropriating words and placing them within different webs of meaning; the second use points to an interruption in the circulation of meaning, constituted by the pull of the interlocutor, and interruption without which meaning is not possible.’ [OL 195]

But nothing preserves this second ‘moment’ of interruption *except* the activity of the first – the synchronizing activity of language as enunciated. Somehow, the first ‘reties’ that which was interrupted but in such a way as to preserve the interruption – in a ‘knot’. Derrida’s analysis interrogates the metaphor and suggests that this means that there can not simply be a knot in isolation<sup>15</sup>.

‘But there must be a *series*, a beginning of a series of that “same” (at least two occurrences) in order for the writing that dislocates the Same toward the Relation to have a hold and a chance. E.L. would have been unable to make understandable the *probable* essence of language without that singular repetition, without that citation or recitation which makes the Same come to rather than returning to the Other. I said a “chance” because one is never constrained, even when obligated, to read what is thus rendered legible.’ [ATVM 24]

Derrida repeats his suspicions of even identifying such a knot and reading it as enigmatic trace of the beyond. In this concept of the trace, Levinas insists on its nonphenomenality, but if it is nonphenomenal in this way (a *withdrawing*), then:

‘... nothing forces us to read it like that. It can always be interpreted without passing beyond, the beyond here not opening out to anyone or anything at all. The second “at this very moment” can always be made to return to the first, enveloping it anew, ignoring the series effect or reducing it to a homogenous concept of seriality, ignoring what this seriality bears of the singular other and of the out-of-series (*hors-série*). Everything would then return to the same.’ [ATVM 24-25]

We see here the repetition – or stand-off – of the two positions. In many ways, Levinas’s diagnosis in ‘Wholly Otherwise’ is correct. In a manner of speaking,

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<sup>15</sup> ‘The structure of the ‘knot’ in Levinas, the difference, we are led to expect, between the two instances of the same phrase, enable us to read the trace as trace of something not appearing as a phenomenon. In Derrida’s discussion, the Levinasian text is respected; but it is also urged towards a supplementary process, towards one where interruption becomes interruptions. They are absolute but plural and thus not stable units, but refer out to other knots, other interruptions.’ [OL 200]



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Derrida does stand for the creaturely, “originary finitude”, and Levinas for the infinite (divine) event of transcendence. Levinas, in both *Otherwise than Being* and ‘Wholly Otherwise’, is content to simply differentiate the two positions. Derrida, however, within the tradition of critical philosophy, continues to ask what *justifies* Levinas’s *interpretation* of language and the Other. The question of language is therefore crucial in philosophical presentation. ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ structured its critique around Levinas’s reading of the history of philosophy; *Otherwise than Being* is constructed in a different style and so necessitates a change in register. But the fundamentals of the question remain – how can Levinas *write* of the transcendent and how can it be *philosophy*? This essay might even be understood to go further than ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ since it questions the stability of this conceptuality.

Derrida’s point of leverage is the constellation of metaphors chosen by Levinas to articulate the specific textuality of a philosophical text that preserves the interruptions of the Saying by the Said. In ‘Violence and Metaphysics’, we saw how the crux for Derrida was whether *Totality and Infinity* could even be read as philosophy since it seemed to rest in an empiricism content to trust in the transparency or instrumentality of its metaphors. Again, we are faced with the same question – is it philosophy? Or is it empiricism?

The key metaphor is the “retied knot” that re-seams the tears caused by the interruption of the Saying in the Said. A deconstructive reading of this metaphor shows how it contests the very structure set up in Levinas’s reading. That is, Derrida’s insistence on the necessity of investigating how “Levinas’s Work works”, how it can write what it claims, reveals the fundamental instability of the *de facto* distinction between both the Saying and the Said and Being and the Infinite that comes from beyond Being. Thus, in contrast to both Bernasconi and Critchley, we should insist that Derrida *does reiterate* the questions of ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ albeit in a different manner<sup>16</sup>. Rather than drawing attention to a lack of care for presentation, Derrida interrogates Levinas’s new thematics on this issue.

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<sup>16</sup> Bernasconi ‘Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy’ p. 156.



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Bernasconi has warned against allowing the models of philosophical disputation to overwrite a quite distinct phenomenon: ‘The discussion between Derrida and Levinas which is so often assimilated to standard models of argument – refutation and response – and thereby enclosed within philosophy, bears the mark of another kind of encounter, one not governed by the model of knowledge or even of truth.’<sup>17</sup> It is perhaps stretching the issue to present the exchange between Derrida and Levinas as a discussion; nor can it fairly be glossed as the ‘ethical encounter’ of *Totality and Infinity* – Derrida himself has insisted on its finitude<sup>18</sup>.

If we are meant to treat it as some form of intimate correspondence, then it is unclear how it is open to us to read it productively. Or perhaps we are meant to revel in its creativity, as writing? The philistine haunts this thesis – deadened to nesh sentiment and troubled by the consequences of repeating the charges of others that this ‘philosophy’ (if that is even what it is for Bernasconi) is not concerned with truth. Deconstruction is certainly a different species of philosophical writing, but it is not thereby uninterested in knowledge and truth – indeed, this thesis repeats the *epistemological* concern of Derrida – Levinas cannot justify his writings as knowledge or ethics.

### Affirmation of contamination

The metaphor of the “retied knot” “obsesses” *Otherwise than Being*. Across several detailed pages, Derrida interrogates its functioning as Levinas seeks to justify how it is possible to write about the Saying in a philosophical text. Importantly, this is not faithful re-presentation, but commentary as interrogation of what covers over important philosophical themes: writing, language and the metaphysics of being.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 159.

<sup>18</sup> We should note that Levinas made no explicit response after writing ‘Wholly Otherwise’ and that both this text and the sections in *Otherwise than Being* supposedly marked by ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ suffer in comparison to the patient, extensive readings produced by Derrida.



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The ‘retied knot’ offers a way to understand the manner in which the saying that interrupts the said can still be preserved without being assimilated by the said. Derrida’s challenge is chiefly developed through the problem of *contamination*. What allows these interruptions to be interpreted as moments free from contamination by the given? On the writing of interruption, Derrida notes:

‘That is the strange force of a text which frees itself to you without apparent defense, a force not that of the written, to be sure, in the current sense of the term, which obligates the written in simply making it possible. The disturbance which it *refers* (the Relation it relates to the other in linking to it the *récit*) is never assured, perceptible, or *demonstrable*: neither a demonstrative conclusion nor a phenomenal showing. By definition it is not a controllable disturbance, it is not readable within the *inside* of logic, semiotics, language, grammaticality, lexicon, or rhetoric with their supposedly internal criteria, because nothing is less certain than the rigorous limits of such an inside.

‘The internal element must have been holed or broken through ... torn, even *more than once*, in more or less regular fashion, so that the regularity of the tear (I would even say the *strategy* of the tear, if this word, strategy, did not betoken too much – for him, not for me – toward economic calculation, the ruse of a stratagem and warring violence at the very point when on the contrary everything must be so calculated that calculation should not have the last word over everything) may have obligated you to receive the order which is gently given to you, confided to you, in order to read thus and not otherwise, to read *otherwise* and not thus.’ [ATVM 25]

This passage begins by insisting that the disturbance of the Said by the Saying is neither *perceptible* (available to intuition and hence amenable to phenomenological analysis) nor demonstrable through metaphysical axiomatics<sup>19</sup>.

There are no internal criteria for interpreting an “encounter” as such an interruption and hence one is not *obligated* to read it thus (is it then a wager? A decision? Even a projection?). Moreover, Derrida introduces a theme alien to Levinas’s own considerations, by suggesting that a certain regularity must attach to these interruptions for the assertion of the model of the Saying and the Said to *cohere* with what is available to intuition. But such an idea of regularity would immediately begin to undermine the understanding of the tear as coming

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<sup>19</sup> In this way, the Levinasian trace is anarchic [L&P 149]: ‘Or are they not also the embers still glowing beneath the ashes ... the truth illuminates whoever breathes on the flame and coaxes it back to life’ – from ‘Means of Identification’ cited by Caygill [L&P 200].



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uncontaminated from beyond being. We can discern here a veiled structuralist riposte to Levinas: the meaning of the tears comes from the structure in which they are preserved, not from the tears themselves.

In other words, Derrida again raises the question of *justification* and then suggests that even a 'dogmatic' assertion of this metaphysical model would engender certain paradoxes. As this commentary develops, Derrida's own vocabulary begins to overwrite Levinas's<sup>20</sup>.

'Apparently he likes the tear (*déchirure*) but detests contamination. Yet what holds his writing in suspense is that one must welcome contamination, the *risk* of contamination, in chaining the tears and regularly *resuming them* within the philosophical text or tissue of a *récit*. This *resumption* is even the condition upon which what is beyond essence may keep its chance against the enveloping seam of the thematical or dialectical. ... The risk of contamination must be regularly accepted (in series) in order to leave its chance to the noncontamination of the other by the rule of the same.'  
[ATVM 26]

In our analyses of *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, we noted that the task envisioned by Levinas involves the *production* of the infinite within the given, in such a way as to direct a political transformation of being (and hence render it meaningful). Here, in emphasising 'resumption', Derrida recalls this interaction of the Infinite and Being: the face demands a response, it is not to be contemplated [E&I 88]. *Resumption* plays the role of the 'profile' of the alter ego: it is the condition of interpretation. The human is the site at which Being is undone by the possible arrival of transcendence; that which, Levinas sometimes describes as 'inspiration' or 'prophetism' but which is thematised in *Totality and Infinity* as Desire and in *Otherwise than Being* as glory. The risk, so often glossed by Levinas as 'a fine risk', that Being might cover over the interruption must be accepted in order to challenge the given in the first place. This noncontamination cannot be guaranteed and so it is a question of preserving it. It

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<sup>20</sup> 'But this series, says Derrida, is multiple in its complication: the knots which are retied and reknotted insert interruptions and prevent even continuity in the interruption. And Derrida continues his sentences in this work on Levinas in a style which brings together contradictions, but which makes their discontinuity unabsolute. He may use a flowing rhythm, a syntax which sweeps subordinating phrases into coordination, thus giving a sense of addition ...' [OL 197].



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is a question of knowing how it might be preserved without some element of contamination. But this entails that there is no *rapport sans rapport*.

For Levinas, language as discourse, as thematization, covers over the Relation to the Other, but the Relation to the Other is the condition of possibility of language. That which tears language is also that which produces it. Derrida insists that this means that contamination cannot be avoided.

‘... the moment of the Other, marks the instance of the tear by a Relation which *will have made* “only possible” the continuum itself, that will therefore not have been (or have come to be) the continuum it seemed to be. The absolutely future anterior of the tear – as an absolutely past anterior – will have made possible the effect of the seam. And not vice versa. *But only on the condition of letting itself be contaminated, resumed, and sewn up within what it has made possible.*’ [ATVM 27 my emphasis]

Again, to repeat my general point through particular instances, the other that makes possible the continuum by its immanent transcendence, operates in such a way that the continuum cannot be interpreted as homogeneous or as a set of discre(e)t(e) cuts. As Derrida previously wrote, suggesting it as the question to govern the entire reading of *Totality and Infinity*: ‘one wonders whether history itself does not begin with this relationship to the other which Levinas places beyond history’ [VM 116].

Further, the issue of knots and contaminations can be generalised so that what supposedly distinguishes Levinas’s books from others within the history of philosophy (and even those of other disciplines) – the ‘ethical saying’, is placed in question:

‘Knotted threads are formed in it, recapturing the tears, but otherwise. They allow the discontinuous to appear in its trace, but since the trace is not to be reassembled into its appearance, it can always resemble the trace which discontinuity leaves within the logical discourse of the State, of philosophy, of medicine. ... but here, nonphenomenality must obligate us, without constraint, to read the trace as trace, the interruption as interruption according to an *as such* no longer appropriable as phenomenon of essence. The structure of the knot must be other, although it resembles it quite a lot. You are never required to read or recognize the trace of interruption, it only comes about through you for whom it is freed, and yet he will have, wholly otherwise, obligated you to read what one is not obligated to read.’ [ATVM 27-28]



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This passage directs itself at Levinas's claim that the State does not 'untie but cuts knots' and in the forms through which it polices *these cuts are not retied* – 'the intervals are not recuperated' [*OtB* 170]. Knots are invoked to counter this state, they must not be indiscernible for then no block to fate would be produced [*OtB* 105]<sup>21</sup>. They must interrupt in a counter narrative – hence the paradox: interruption must be nonphenomenal, but phenomenized in a narrative. It would then be a question of how one knew which activity one was engaged in – the seaming over of the state or the seaming into counter-narrative. Again, Derrida repeats the problem: although the knotted thread is invoked it in fact only serves to identify a general feature of any writing whatsoever – not the peculiar feature of Levinas's own writing. If there is no appearance of the trace, then it is not clear how we are justified in insisting that it does *not* pertain to other writings: how are we obligated but never required to recognize the trace?

Derrida pursues this idea to conclude that, to be distinct from symptomatic discontinuities in other discourses, the knot that preserves the Saying must assume a determination within the element of the Same. Levinas himself recognizes this problem in his analyses. Derrida states the problem bluntly: '... there are many ways of confecting such an inextricable mesh [which would preserve proximity] rather than another, since the risk has to do with their not all being equivalent. There a philosophy, or an aesthetics, a rhetoric, a poetics, a psychagogy, an economy still remains to be negotiated: between, *if this could still be said*, the before and the beyond.' [*ATVM* 29] [my italics] Derrida's suspicion is that there is a different way to account for the features of language: at key points he forces his own adopted distinction between the constative and the performative into the analysis [e.g. *ATVM* 35]<sup>22</sup>. The significance of this

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<sup>21</sup> The reference to the knotted thread is accompanied by reference to the Fates on two occasions: '... we must try to articulate the break-up of a fate that reigns in essence, in that its fragments and modalities, despite their diversity, belong to one another, that is, do not escape the same order, do not escape Order, as though the bits of the thread cut by the Parques were then knotted together again.' [*OtB* 8] See also [*OtB* 105].

<sup>22</sup> '... the urging of microstructures and micrologies in other's work into this particular embedded dissymmetry, enables Derrida to relate others' work to his own concerns without simplified general repetition of a general form.' [*OL* 196]



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move being that the distinction is *immanent* to language as finite and yet unbounded.

This suspicion is developed in novel and concrete form by a consideration of the status of the language used in *Otherwise than Being*. The thematization of what is nonthematizable disrupts the classical order of simultaneity and logical systematicity; Levinas's own understanding of how the work works turns every word into only a provisional rhetorical placement, with the effect that 'we get caught up in a network of quotation marks'<sup>23</sup>.

'If you wish to talk of E.L.'s operation when he sets himself into "this work", when he writes "at this moment", and if you ask "What is he doing?" and "How does he do it?" then not only must you dis-locate the "he" who is no longer the subject of an operation ... but you must right away clarify that the Work, as his work gives and gives again to be thought is no longer of the technical or productive order of the operation. ... There, near but infinitely distanced, the dislocation is to be found in the interior without inside of language which is yet opened out to the outside of the wholly other. The infinite law of quotation marks seems to suspend any reference, enclosing the work upon the borderless context which it gives to itself: yet behold here this law making absolute reference to the commandment of the wholly other, obligating beyond any delimitable context.' [ATVM 34]

Note the repetition of the charge offered by Levinas against Derrida in 'Wholly Otherwise' – Levinas's Work is endlessly deferred, without reference, anchored only by the encounter with the Other on which it depends in a decision to interpret it thus always held in place by quotation marks and a certain rhetorical irony – for it cannot claim as its meaning what it ostensibly means. Paradoxical in its structure: there is no reference, yet it insists on its 'before the law'. Disseminating in language as a only a potential infinite, it claims status in respect of a positive infinite. Hobson describes this 'strange relation' as a double-bind between negotiation and the non-negotiable [OL 141], but how is not simply that madness or delusion which Levinas fears?

Hobson argues that this structure '...allows for entities which are out of the web of traces, where are unintuitable and unpresentable, but to which we have some

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<sup>23</sup> 'The work of E.L. *comprehends* an *other* manner to think obligation in the "one must", an *other* manner of thinking the work, and even of thinking thought. One must therefore read it otherwise, read there "otherwise" the "one must", and otherwise the otherwise.' [ATVM 33]



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sort of access, paradoxically and imperfectly, by a process of negotiation and contamination' [OL 200]. Yet, it would seem that Derrida takes the argument in the other direction precisely questioning what sort of 'access' can be claimed *philosophically* for the 'unintuitable and unrepresentable'. This underlies the two pages on 'illeity' where the two orders of the positive infinite and language cannot be made to latch onto each other. Derrida culminates this line of investigation with a fantastic, hysterical, performative sentence to demonstrate how one would have to write to comment faithfully on Levinas:

'Now *it would have been necessary* to say, it must therefore be said, that "he" has withdrawn nothing whatever, "he" has *made appear* the possibility of that withdrawal, he has not *made* it appear, he has *let* it appear, he has not let it *appear*, since what he has let (not to be but to make a sign, and not a sign but an enigma), what he has let produce itself as enigma, and to produce itself is still too much, is not of the phenomenal order, he has "let" "appear" the non-appearing as such (but the non-appearing never disappears into its "as such", etc.) on the limit of the beyond, a limit that is not a determinable, visible, or thinkable line, and that has no definable edges, on the "limit", therefore, of the "beyond" of phenomenon and of essence: that is to say (!) the "he" himself. That's it, the "he" himself, that is to say (!), the Other. "He" has said "He", even before "I" may say "I" and in order that, if that is possible, "I" may say "I".' [ATVM 35-36]

It is this series of erasures that suggests to Derrida the concept of *sériature* (a neologism comprising the word "*série*" and "*rature*" [erasure]). Levinas's very writing practices a certain citationality: using but not subscribing to the hither side of language which always betrays the beyond. But what does it mean for this beyond to be marked by a pronoun? The very gesture appears to betray its arbitrary imposition and 'menaces the authenticity of the trace' and the distinction between the trace and the sign [ATVM 37]. We return to the problem of *Totality and Infinity* – how do the two orders relate? *L'Autre* and *L'Autrui*; the "he" beyond language and the "he" within language.

Levinas is only able to append his name at the end of a shifting displacement of faulty words<sup>24</sup>. As such, the authority of the author is transformed. Much of the commentary has picked up on Derrida's neologism *sériature*, as if it were

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<sup>24</sup> 'The words there describe (constate) and produce (perform) undecidably a written and a writing immediately implying the "I-now-here" of the scriptor.' [ATVM 22] Compare Derrida's discussion to that found in Hegel's discussion of 'Sense-Certainty'. Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit* [1806] translated by A.V. Miller (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 58-66.



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championed as a valorised description of Levinas's 'exemplary textuality' (e.g. Critchley [ED 173]). But we should note that it forcefully challenges Levinas's own self-understanding since it generalises his own dominant metaphor of the 'retied knot' to undermine the opposition between Saying and Said. Derrida's challenge is as follows: why interpret *de facto* (by fiat) the knots as occasions of transcendence interrupting language *rather* than as products of language itself? *Sériature* may result from the *différential* structure of language.

It is necessary to stress the violence intended by Derrida's commentary. Propelling its metaphoricity to the limit, Derrida overwrites *Otherwise than Being* with what he terms *sériature*. This first part of 'At this Very Moment ...' is in effect a palimpsest: *différance* effectuates the phenomenon identified by Levinas without appeal to that which cannot be justified from within a phenomenological methodology. If the beginning of the same is already doubled, then the very understanding of the Same as Self-Same is challenged, then '[t]here is no more a "negative" contamination than there is a simple beyond or a simple inside of language, on the one side and on the other of some border.' [ATVM 38] *Sériature* marks the culminating displacement of the Levinas's metaphysics by forcing the metaphor of the retied knot to its limit and beyond. Not only does *Otherwise than Being not* achieve the level of critical philosophical presentation, its very conceptual architecture is shown to be unstable. Saying is displaced by generalised writing: the themes of 'Violence and Metaphysics' return or, rather, remain.

Following Hobson's analysis, we should conclude that, far from being an instrument, language itself is a variegated and complex structure that 'cannot be gathered into a site of present synthesis' [OL 138]. But this failure of synthesis does not mark a lack, or limit, beyond which the other or illeity lies. If the other appears in 'phantasmal form' and 'points ... to what cannot be represented' [OL 141] this is not because that other is beyond being. Hobson summarises the 'strange attractor' of the 'other' produced through Derrida's engagement with Levinas as a 'shadowy entity, enabling subjectivity and referentiality without presence' [OL 144], but we should stress that it is not the positive infinite of Levinas's *l'Autrui*, illeity or glory.



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Derrida's insistence on language and phenomenality means that ethics, if there is any, falls within finitude: 'The excess beyond synthesis in language means that other meanings or the possibility of other meanings, future ones as well as past, have to be deferred to. But that responsibility may not be answered to – it is because it may *always possibly not* be answered to that there is an ethics.' [OL 138] Ethics is caught up in relation to the *heteron* – it begins with the law and the calculable in *their* internal self-differentiation. The 'call' comes from within "being" not from without. In this sense, contra Visker, 'At this Very Moment ...' does not "return" to Levinas's distinction between the same and the other – the other is not an absolute alterity beyond being for Derrida and, indeed, is only apparent through negotiation and calculation<sup>25</sup>.

### Coda – Bois!

Derrida's change in register is an attempt to *engage* Levinas *after having failed* to engage him with 'Violence and Metaphysics' – Levinas read it, and took it badly. The change in register attempts to solicit a response. Levinas is invited or, perhaps, commanded to drink up. Critchley makes much of this word, "bois", which concludes the strange final paragraph of 'At this Very Moment ...' [ATVM 46-47]. He contextualises it within the story of Rebekkah from Genesis, the offer of water as the gift of hospitality to the stranger<sup>26</sup>. It is the ethical gift.

My pessimism moves in a different direction. In French "bois" carries two different meanings, the imperative of *boire*, 'to drink', and the noun, which could be translated as 'wood'. What enables us to decide here between the two translations? What does this equivocation indicate of language and of writing that breaks with Levinas's theory? Secondly, the imperative carries a different register within a tradition framed by the final instruction issued to Socrates: drink. The gift to quench thirst? or the command of the jailer? Given Levinas's earlier refusals, might the latter not be to mind. One could continue on this

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<sup>25</sup> Compare Visker *Truth and Singularity* pp. 290-92.

<sup>26</sup> "Bois" – Derrida's Final Word on Levinas' in *Re-Reading Levinas* edited by Robert Bernasconi & Simon Critchley (London, Athlone Press, 1991), pp. 162-189.



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trajectory and ask whether one can be so confident in the operation of the 'gift' within the works of a writer who has mused on the troubling double meaning of *pharmakon* – cure and poison. What is Derrida's gift intended to do? And why did Levinas *not* drink? He made no further engagement with Derrida.

My contention throughout is to emphasise *both* the fundamental philosophical differences between Derrida and Levinas *and* the problem of writing as it crucially determines Derrida's text. It is perhaps important to note that 'At this Very Moment ...' is delivered before the explosion of interest in Levinas in the mid-1980s: Derrida's engagement becomes less direct in the later work. These writings are the subject of the next chapter. We will try to remain immanent to the form of these writings while demonstrating the manner in which that very form keys into the philosophical claims that demarcate this persistent dispute.



## Part Three

### Reading Derrida Otherwise

#### Chapter Six

#### Conjunctural Writings: Derrida's later writing on Levinas

'... when Derrida speaks with least reservation on normative issues he draws consistently and extensively on Levinas's work. This is explicit in 'Force of Law', where Levinas's conception of justice is cited on two occasions, both crucial to Derrida's argument, and is implicit but perhaps even more pervasive in 'The Politics of Friendship', where the whole vocabulary of asymmetry, heteronomy and 'the curvature of social space' is borrowed from *Totality and Infinity*.'

Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*<sup>1</sup>

I take the above quotation to orient this chapter, which turns to a set of writings including 'Force of Law'. The main argument advanced will be that to identify where Derrida 'speaks with least reservation' amounts to an enormous philological problem. The idea of the philosopher as figure, or intellectual, pronouncing on normative issues is almost alien to his concerns<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, when references to or readings of Levinas appear in his works after 'At this Very Moment', we will see that this problem of authorial voice is, if anything, exacerbated. One could almost say that when the name Levinas appears in these later texts, more reservation is "manifest" than in any of his other writings.

For Visker, the meaning of this 'indecision' or 'hesitation'<sup>3</sup> is unclear, but marks a new affinity which supplants the critique of 'Violence and Metaphysics':

'I find it hard not to conclude from this that Derrida has moved himself into a position that is so close to Levinas that it has become impossible for him to state exactly what his remaining 'reticence' might amount to. And yet, instead of seeing here only a "difference in signature" as Derrida suggests. I

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<sup>1</sup> Second edition – [ED 269].

<sup>2</sup> See the comments relating to Sartre in Jacques Derrida 'Interview with *le nouvel observateur*' [1983] translated by David Allison et. al. in *Derrida and Différance* edited by David Wood & Robert Bernasconi (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 71-82.

<sup>3</sup> *Truth and Singularity* p. 313.



should like to risk the hypothesis that the difficulty he experiences in articulating what is *philosophically* at stake in his hesitations is due to the fact that they cannot be articulated once one has neutered the logic of the 'yes' before all yes and no, which seems to be at the core of Derrida's 'inheritance' from Levinas.'<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, it is striking how both Visker and Critchley come to the same conclusion but starting from different premises – or rather, different interpretations of the same premises: for the former, reservation is the sign of alliance, for the latter, the absence of reservation. The endeavour of this chapter is to read Derrida otherwise. When dealing with the author of *Of Grammatology*, one should be extremely attentive to the practice of citation. As we shall see, the recent writings which “address” Levinas, at times come close to ventriloquism that generates a ‘structural doubling’ through ‘irony, repetition and quotation’ [OL 61]. I shall invoke the term *conjunctural writing*, to insist on the manner in which Derrida's “opinions” retreat behind the construction of sites at which different strands of the philosophical tradition contest the space of Levinas's system. That is, nowhere since 1980, when dealing with Levinas does Derrida write without formal devices to displace the notion of ‘speaking without reservation’. Such a writing *differs* from both the writing of ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ and ‘At this Very Moment ...’ but preserves in its formal constitution an opposition to Levinas's treatment of the history of philosophy: in so doing any simple opposition between form and content is displaced<sup>5</sup>. Taking into account the thematics developed in Chapter Three, this concluding chapter emphasises the critical problems underlying a writing that displaces the current conception of philosophical writing: writing what one, as individual, holds to be true.

This sixth chapter will examine four further examples of Derrida's writings on Levinas: *The Gift of Death*<sup>6</sup>; “A Word of Welcome”, which comprises the main

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 315.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Derrida takes ‘writing, ‘trace’, ‘inscription’ as the unmetaphorical locus of a relation to the history of philosophy. But this constellation of terms also has the advantage that by and of itself it works to undo the distinction between form and content, being both theme and medium for the theme (discussion of writing is done in writing).’ [OL 13]

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida *The Gift of Death* [1992]; Translated by David Wills; Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 1995. Hereafter abbreviated to *GD* followed by page reference.



body of the book, published in English as *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas; On Cosmopolitanism*<sup>7</sup>; 'Force of Law'. It will also briefly discuss *The Politics of Friendship*. Often read as simply demonstrating Derrida's homage to Levinas, or the development of Levinasian themes, these works are in fact far more complex. What has been chiefly ignored is the polemical intent of situating the work of a philosopher who claimed to break with the history of Western philosophy *back into that context*. In giving full weight to these precursors (chiefly Heidegger, Kant and Kierkegaard), Derrida's own voice is withdrawn or displaced in a manner distinct from that examined in the previous chapter. Moreover, the moments where Derrida appears to drop his philological ventriloquism point to fundamental philosophical and political differences with Levinas, but even here the embedded relation of these moments, as 'junction points' within those texts [OL 74], means they resist injudicious thematic extraction. While *The Gift of Death* can be seen as staging a head-to-head between Kierkegaard and Levinas along the axis of religion and ethics, 'A Word of Welcome' confronts a charged reading of the theme of hospitality with Kant's articulation of cosmopolitanism. In both works, the preliminary for these dramatic climaxes is Derrida's insistence that Levinas be read alongside Heidegger. These constellations, or 'polylogues' in Hobson's acute phrase [OL 228], serve to estrange the major tendency of sycophantic Levinasianism, which writes as if Levinas did indeed inaugurate a clean break in philosophy.

### *The Gift of Death*

*The Gift of Death* is marked by an extreme reticence, a withdrawal of the authorial voice into the presentation of commentary. Although some have extracted a thematic "Derridean" content from this work, this has been achieved by ignoring the form of the essay<sup>8</sup>. Here I will emphasise, the nested structure of a complex weaving of voices. It should be noted that here 'commentary' is not

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida 'On Cosmopolitanism' [1997] translated by Mark Dooley in Jacques Derrida *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London and New York, Routledge, 2001), pp. 3-24. Hereafter abbreviated to *Cosmo* followed by page reference.

<sup>8</sup> See in particular: Peter Hallward 'Translator's Introduction' in Alain Badiou *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* translated by Peter Hallward (London, Verso, 2001), pp.vii-xlvi. The quotations Hallward uses to support his reading of Derrida are often taken from passages where Derrida is either summarising other thinkers or commenting from within their positions.



equated to 'the most faithful reading'; often this commentary or re-representation forces certain themes and affinities to the fore in a manner which might be contestable.

*The Gift of Death* is divided into four chapters<sup>9</sup>. The first begins from within Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays in the History of Philosophy*<sup>10</sup>. Within the first paragraph, having mentioned a constellation of secrecy, the sacred and responsibility, Derrida compares Patočka to Levinas, who also warns against paganism as characterised by demonic or delusional rapture. This conjuncture displaces an easy understanding of Derrida as 'following on' from Levinas or of Derrida owing his conception of the 'Other' to Levinas. For in light of the developments of this thesis, we can see that Patočka's theory on the relationship between Christianity and the history of the European subject *rivals* Levinas's claims in scope and content. But whereas in Levinas, Judaic concepts must be translated into Greek to inform a political project, in Patočka the Christian event gives access to a particular form of historicity that produces a subject formed around a *secret* core<sup>11</sup>.

The first two chapters present this reading of Patočka in such a way as to bring out the common filiation with Levinas, that is to say, Heidegger<sup>12</sup>. Derrida's third chapter complicates this trajectory by introducing Kierkegaard to intensify the point of disjuncture around the secret as it determines the spheres of the ethical and the religious. Patočka analyses the singularity of the event of Christianity as the development of a new concept of secrecy, which breaks with the secret *mysteries* of pagan religion. This new religion is 'an irreducible condition for a joint history of the subject, responsibility and Europe' [*GD* 2]. If

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<sup>9</sup> The French edition of *Donner la mort* contains an extra essay, 'La littérature au secret: une filiation impossible' – in *Donner la mort* (Paris, Galilée, 1999), pp. 159-209.

<sup>10</sup> *Heretical Essays in the History of Philosophy* [1981] translated by Erazim Kohák, edited by James Dodd (Chicago, Open Court, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Derrida performs a similar move in 'Hostipitality' [*sic*], where he brings Levinas into contact with Louis Massignon, a Christian thinker who develops the concepts of "hostage" and "substitution". See Jacques Derrida 'Hostipitality' [1997] translated by Gil Anidjar in *Acts of Religion* pp. 358-420. Derrida speculates that Levinas adopted the concepts from Massignon.

<sup>12</sup> Though Derrida makes no mention of Husserl, this account, like Levinas's, is analogous to Husserl's (see Appendix A).



the demonic confuses the boundaries between the human, the animal and the divine in a participatory celebration of being, for Patočka, the *religious* subject is the subject who circumvents this being through formation of the responsibility. European History is produced by this new form of subjectivity. This does not simply equate to a genealogy of religion but is instead a genealogy of a historical subject whose genesis is traced through the history of Europe. The problem of modern, technological civilisation is that it is unaware of this origin and this history of responsibility: the European subject is marked by its burden of self-justification before others. What is demanded today of historical man [*sic*] is that he recognise and acknowledge this history. *Acknowledged* because the problem itself cannot be transcended or dissolved: history is 'neither a decidable object nor a totality capable of being mastered, precisely because it is tied to *responsibility*, to *faith*, and to the *gift*' [*GD* 5]. It emphasises, instigates or presents an economy of dissymmetry. To wit, the Christian subject is produced between two orders, the finite and the heavenly, which are discontinuous and disjunctive. Responsibility, here, involves negotiating this schism. It is crucial to note that this breaks with the model offered by our reading of Levinas where the idea of the infinite must be produced in the *finite*. Levinas's project becomes meaningless without the infinite time of fecundity in which such a project can be realised. Patočka's Christian subject is divided between two orders which cannot be reconciled in this fashion<sup>13</sup>.

Death has a fundamentally different function within these two schemes. Levinas has no concern for the afterlife whereas the Christian subject's responsibility is constituted by this boundary which possibly opens to another order. The *person* is constituted in this trembling before the other order, in a 'culture of death' where is experienced the "interior force" of the gaze of God. The subject is constituted in learning to die: 'a new discipline of the soul' [*GD* 12]<sup>14</sup>. This vigil over death – the anticipation of dying – produces the soul and is the very essence of philosophy:

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<sup>13</sup> For Levinas, Patočka would be a theological thinker who 'congeals' the beyond into another realm of being.

<sup>14</sup> *Specters of Marx* begins with the statement: 'I would like to learn how to live finally' [op. cit. xvii].



'For one never reinforces enough the fact that it is not the *psychē* that is there in the first place and that comes thereafter to be concerned about its death, to keep watch over it, to be the very vigil of death. No, the soul only distinguishes itself, separates itself, and assembles itself within itself in the experience of this *meletē tou thanatou*. It is nothing other than this concern for dying as a relation to self and an assembling of self.' [GD 14]<sup>15</sup>.

At this point Derrida draws the reader's attention to analogies with Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein*. However, when considering the complicated structure<sup>16</sup> reproduced within Patočka's analysis of secrecy and responsibility, he distinguishes the two on the following basis. Though both can be read as Christian heresies, Derrida takes the Heidegger of *Being and Time* to be 'repeating on an ontological level Christian themes and texts that have been "de-Christianized"'. Patočka, on the other hand, '... reontologizes the historic themes of Christianity and attributes to revelation or to the *mysterium tremendum* the ontological content that Heidegger attempts to remove from it.' [GD 23]

Although Derrida pushes Patočka towards responsibility and thereby produces echoes of Levinas in his evocation of the asymmetry of the response demanded by responsibility, his reading is developed through an emphasis on dissidence and heresy – an insistence 'on what is apart and secret', what escapes religion *qua* institution<sup>17</sup>. As in Levinas, this responsibility demands a new form of political organisation, which breaks with the 'Greco-Roman concept of the state'<sup>18</sup>; to overcome the decline of technological modernity, a re-appropriation of the Christian tradition is required, one which acknowledges the *mysterium tremendum* of responsibility. This secret would demand transcendence in a

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<sup>15</sup> See *Aporias* for an extended meditation on the meaning of death in relation to Heidegger and ethnographic and historical accounts of funeral customs. *Aporias* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Complicated since Christianity both breaks with and represses Neoplatonism: 'Platonic mystery thus *incorporates* orgiastic mystery and Christian mystery *represses* Platonic mystery.' [GD 9] But in this repression it is maintained operating inside Christianity; mystery incorporated is not destroyed but is formed as responsibility in its disciplining of fervour.

<sup>17</sup> Do the concepts of conversion and apostasy have their counterpart in Levinas's thought?

<sup>18</sup> 'One should understand that in saying that Christianity has not been thought right through Patočka intends that such a task be undertaken; not only by means of a more thorough thematization but also by means of a political and historical setting-in-train, by means of political and historical action; and he advocates that according to the logic of a messianic eschatology that is nevertheless indissociable from phenomenology.' [GD 28]



social context where state would no longer be a community of persons equal in freedom, but free through relation to a *transcendent god*.

This Christian model operates on a different economy to that presented by Levinas in *Otherwise than Being*. For the good is inflected as the *gift forgetful of itself*. That is, Neoplatonic Christianity instigated the concept of the gift that withdraws its generosity. Contra Pelagian salvation which is merited by works, this gift effaces its merit in its withdrawal. Although the gift to God is thereby transformed into sacrifice, this is not the sacrifice of Levinasian *glory* (which seems to come close to Patočka's depiction of the orgiastic). It is rather the sacrifice of the subject, in that the subject can never know if the good has been performed – the subject is constituted around a secret only God can know. This 'terror of the secret' displaces the complacent relation of subject to object. God comes from another order and sees what is invisible<sup>19</sup>.

Derrida observes that the arguments of the three 'intersect in spite of their differences' [*GD* 43]<sup>20</sup> and brackets off the thought that it is far from clear that one can distinguish Patočka from Heidegger and Levinas along the axis of Christianity. However the themes of Europe, its history and future, are displaced by the first's hyperbolic and heretical form of Christianity. For Patočka seems to insist that responsibility is thoroughly Christian in its emphasis on private secrecy as structuring the individual subject. In the second half of the book, Derrida begins to interrogate this concept of secrecy to specify what such a break might constitute.

Part Three, *Whom to Give to (Knowing Not to Know)*, marks an intensification in the problematic of the secret by introducing the figure of Kierkegaard. Again the chapter begins nested in another's voice: it moves from Patočka to St Paul and on

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<sup>19</sup> 'Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have the glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: that thine alms may be seen in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.' Matthew 6: 1-4.

<sup>20</sup> In a brief aside, Derrida notes that in none of the discourses is sexual difference considered. 'Sexual difference would be a being-up-until-death.' [*GD* 45]



to Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard's pseudonym. Derrida offers a genealogy of the Christian experience of fear and trembling before the secret – the God whom we do not see and whose will we cannot know.

In setting up this tradition, Derrida introduces God as *wholly other* [GD 56ff.]. The expression, *tout autre* is taken from Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, and echoes the '*Tout Autrement*' of Levinas's piece on Derrida. In *Fear and Trembling*<sup>21</sup>, Johannes de Silentio examines the double necessity of the secret of Abraham: he *must* keep the secret of God's command, but he *can only* keep the secret since he is unable to translate it into the order of the ethical – the public accounting in words before others. A responsibility that implies secrecy contests a certain space of Levinasian discourse: the Other demands that I make account of myself. But here the impossibility of speaking is not because Abraham fails to express what the Other demands, for Abraham cannot comprehend what God has demanded.

Johannes de Silentio presents the possibility that the ethical itself is a temptation<sup>22</sup> – in not speaking Abraham transgresses order, but if he were to speak he would transcend God's order. Abraham's *me voici* is before God, not others. Where Kant distinguishes between the action performed out of duty from that merely in conformity with duty, Kierkegaard suggests that there may be an absolute duty beyond both. The knight of faith is not simply Christian since the sacrifice of Isaac is common to Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Insisting on the madness of the *moment* of decision, Kierkegaard's re-presentation of the story of the father of faith is posed against *both* the Hegelian system of mediated reason and ethical *Sittlichkeit* and the good sense of the modern Protestant Church. His repeated disjunction is: *either* there is the possibility of direct, unmediated relation with God *or* there is no faith. The duty to God involves a sacrifice of the duty to all the others, and from this perspective, we can see that, despite its antipathy to Hegelian mediation, Levinasian responsibility to the Other remains

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<sup>21</sup> 'Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric' [1843] translated by Walter Lowrie in *Fear and Trembling and the Book on Adler* (London, Everyman's Library, 1994), pp. 1-110.

<sup>22</sup> 'It impels me to speak, to reply, to account for something, and thus to dissolve my singularity in the medium of the concept.' [GD 61]



an economy of religion to the extent that the privacy of the relation to the particular other is organised within the space of institutions and the demands of justice emanating from the third.

Although Derrida does not mention it, through the conjunction with Kierkegaard, the secularised notion of God at work in Levinas comes to the fore: there is no personal God for Levinas. From out of this consideration of Kierkegaard, Derrida precipitates the sense that duty is as much constituted by alterity and singularity as responsibility<sup>23</sup>. It takes the form of the sentence that will be used as the title of the forth section: *tout autre est tout autre*. This is translated by David Wills as 'Every other (one) is every (bit) other'. Derrida intensifies the demand of the other to encompass the habitual preferences of everyday life: the individual subject is never able to justify the decisions that involve sacrificing the demands of some others in favour of the demands of other others: 'But I am sacrificing and betraying at every moment all my other obligations; my obligations to the other others whom I know or don't know, the billions of my fellows (without mentioning the animals that are even more other others than my fellows), my fellows who are dying of starvation or sickness.' [GD 69]

This demand has attracted startled attention from some commentators as it seems to register with Levinasian "hyperbole", such as, 'when we sit down at the table in the morning and drink coffee, we kill an Ethiopian who doesn't have any coffee'<sup>24</sup>. Yet this intensification of responsibility is the theme that continually arises from an examination of the concepts, inhabited as they are by a fundamental aporia (safeguarded only by tenuous convention).

'What is thus found at work in everyday discourse, in the exercise of justice, and first and foremost in the axiomatics of private, public, or international law, in the conduct of international politics, diplomacy, and war, is a lexicon

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<sup>23</sup> 'As a result, the concepts of responsibility, of decision, of duty, are condemned a priori to paradox, scandal, and aporia. Paradox, scandal, and aporia are themselves nothing other than sacrifice, the revelation of conceptual thinking at its limit, at its death, at its finitude.' [GD 68]

<sup>24</sup> Emmanuel Levinas 'The Paradox of Morality' in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* edited by Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London, Routledge, 1988). p. 173. Cited by David Wood in 'Responsibility Reinscribed (and How)', *Responsibilities of Deconstruction (Pli: Warwick Journal of Philosophy* volume 6) edited by Jonathon Dronsfield & Nick Midgley (Summer 1997), pp. 103-113; p. 109.



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concerning responsibility that can be said to hover vaguely about a concept that is nowhere to be found, even if we can't go so far as to say that it doesn't correspond to any concept at all.' [GD 85]

As Derrida notes (his voice comes to the fore, here, in the fourth section) civilised society is monopolised by 'monotonous complacency' such that those who seek to interrogate the concepts *seriously* are labelled as relativists or subject to the 'inexhaustible resources' of eristical reasoning<sup>25</sup>. Derrida explicitly gestures towards the outmoded functioning of these concepts in their inability to grasp the structures and forces organising the current world order. Whilst at the same time, this logic of sacrificing is *instituted* in the very real operations of that "world".

'Not only is it true that such a society participates in this incalculable sacrifice, it actually organises it. The smooth functioning of its economic, political, and legal affairs, the smooth functioning of its moral discourse and good conscience presupposes the permanent operation of this sacrifice. ... That this order is founded upon a bottomless chaos (the abyss or open mouth) is something that will necessarily brought home one day to those who just as necessarily forget the same.' [GD 86]

Crucially, the third chapter has seen a commentary on *Fear and Trembling*, which by virtue of the conjuncture of this text with those of Patočka, Heidegger and Levinas, has enabled a transformation of that text. At the fulcrum of this transformation is the footnote on page 78. There Derrida cites Levinas's reservations with respect to Kierkegaard's interpretation of the sacrifice of Isaac. Troubled by the elevation of the singularity of the self above ethical discourse, Levinas suggests instead that the 'most intense moment of the drama' of Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac is the 'attention Abraham pays to the voice that brings him back to the ethical order by forbidding him to carry out the human sacrifice.... It is there, in the ethical, that there is an appeal to the uniqueness of the subject and sense is given to life in the defiance of death.'<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> This is not confined to "Anglo-American" philosophy. See Wood's essay for an example of reversion to dominant tropes of reasoning when faced with these analyses from both Levinas and Derrida [ibid.].

<sup>26</sup> Levinas *Noms Propres* (Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1976), p. 113. Cited by Derrida [GD 78 fn.]



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Running the two texts across each other, Derrida instigates a general trembling of the distinction between the ethical and the religious. 'If God is completely other. the figure or name of the wholly other, then every other (one) is every (bit) other. *Tout autre est tout autre.*' [GD 77-78] This structure, displaced from Kierkegaard's discourse, traverses the whole of ethical generality, everywhere there is found to be something wholly other [*tout autre*]: 'Translated into this extraordinary story, the truth is shown to possess the very structure of what occurs every day. Through its paradox it speaks of the responsibility required at every moment for every man and every woman.' [GD 78]

Such decisions as are required to sacrifice the demands of some others before the demands of other others is a decision, whereby we are required to act like knights of faith 'at every moment': these decisions remain secret and unjustified unless they collapse into banal formulae.

Derrida commences the fourth and final section with an examination of this *tout autre est tout autre*. In its apparent tautology it calls forth two incompatible themes:

- The quality of being wholly other is reserved for God alone;
- The infinite alterity of the wholly other is recognised in each man and woman.

This sentence becomes the site of contestation: Levinas against Kierkegaard. Yet, what the apparent tautology performs is the very impossibility of deciding and differentiating between the two positions. In attempting to distinguish God from the human other, Levinas would be forced to perform a move analogous to Kierkegaard's separation of the religious and the ethical.

'If every human is wholly other, if everyone else, or every other one, is every bit other, then one can no longer distinguish between a claimed generality of ethics that would need to be sacrificed in sacrifice, and the faith that turns towards God alone, as wholly other, turning away from human duty. ... Neither one nor the other can assure himself of a concept of the ethical and of the religious that is of consequence; and consequently they are especially unable to determine the limit between those two orders.



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Kierkegaard would also have to admit, as Levinas reminds him, that ethics is also the order of and respect for absolute singularity, and not only that of the generality or of the repetition of the same. ... Levinas is no longer able to distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and that of every human. His ethics is already a religious one.' [GD 84]

Now, this passage conflicts with my own reading, developed earlier, which would insist on a rigorous distinction between *l'Autre* and *l'Autrui* – with only the latter being described as a positive infinite by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (which appears to be Derrida's main reference here and elsewhere amongst these later writings). Even if God in Levinas is refigured into the focus of a religion of social relations, this passage of religious tropes into the ethical renders such a categorisation unstable. "Ethics" cannot avoid being religious. On Derrida's reading, the negotiation or management of the ethical obsession by the demand of justice is refigured as sacrifice of the far off for the closest – though Levinas notes the impossibility of 'passing by the closest'<sup>27</sup>, for Derrida it is not clear that this can be justified independently of its residue of good sense.

Moreover in analysing the unmarked citation from the Sermon on the Mount [GD 107]<sup>28</sup>, Derrida develops a reading of the economy of sacrifice that persists in the attempt to move to a direct relation with God. This equates to a demystification of the giving that is made in secret (interior and known only to God who is not seen or comprehended); operating as a wager on a dual economy; the laying up of treasures in heaven rather than on earth breaks with the external body – do not let the left hand know what the right hand is doing. The interior of the soul valorised by Patočka as the authentic future of Europe is reduced to the calculation of a displaced but not purified economy:

'Another economy? Perhaps the same one in simulacrum, an economy that is ambiguous enough to seem to integrate noneconomy. ... It begins by denouncing an offering that appears too calculating still; one that would

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<sup>27</sup> '... justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest. The equality of all is borne by my inequality, the surplus of my duties over my rights. The forgetting of self moves justice.' [OtB 159]

<sup>28</sup> 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will be your heart also.' Matthew 6: 19-21.



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renounce earthly, finite, accountable, exterior, visible wages, one that would exceed an economy of retribution and exchange only to capitalize on it by gaining a profit or surplus value that was infinite, heavenly, incalculable, interior and secret. This would be a sort of secret calculation that would continue to wager on the gaze of God who sees the invisible and sees in my heart what I decline to have seen by my fellow humans.' [GD 109]

In arranging this conjuncture of voices, where does Derrida himself stand? If, as I have argued, it is illegitimate to extract a few quotations from this work to get at what Derrida holds to be true<sup>29</sup>, what can one say instead? *The Gift of Death* is interlarded with passages that specifically relate to this problem of *writing* as it ranges across the themes of pseudonymy, citation, keeping silent, and irony.

Derrida chastises those who would hold on to the dogma that only a writing made clearly as a statement of personal belief is responsible:

'One often thinks that responsibility consists of acting and signing *in one's name*. A responsible reflection on responsibility is interested in advance in whatever happens to the name in the event of pseudonymity, metonymy, homonymy, in the matter of what constitutes a *real name*. Sometimes one says or wishes it more effectively, more authentically, in the secret name by which *one calls oneself*, that *one gives oneself or affects to give oneself*, the name that is more than *naming* and *named* in the pseudonym than in the official legality of the public patronym.' [GD 58]

There is a reading that does not simply see "Johannes de Silentio" as a disguise. Similarly, and not coincidentally, when considering the question of irony and unmarked citation (quotation without quotation marks) in relation to Abraham and the text signed in Kierkegaard's own *name* (*The Concept of Irony*), the figure of Bartleby suddenly appears. Bartleby's dictum, 'I would prefer not to', becomes a 'sacrificial passion that would lead him to death' [GD 75].

Developing the thought that Bartleby's responses evoke the future without either predicting or promising', Derrida comments:

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<sup>29</sup> An example of a hasty reading of this text here is Peter Hallward's summary: 'For Lévinas, as for Derrida, after him, the other is *other* only if he immediately evokes or expresses the *absolutely* (divinely) other. Since the alterity of the other is simultaneously 'the alterity of the human other [*Autrui*] and of the Most High', so than our responsibility to this other is a matter of 'unconditional obedience', 'trauma', 'obsession', 'persecution' and so on.' [op. cit. pp. xxii-xxiii]



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'There is concentrated within them a sort of sublime irony. Speaking in order not to say anything or to say something other than what one thinks. speaking in such a way as to intrigue, disconcert, question, or have someone or something else speak (the law, the lawyer), means speaking ironically. Irony, in particular Socratic irony, consists of not saying anything, declaring that one doesn't have any knowledge of something, but doing that in order to interrogate, to have someone or something (the lawyer, the law) speak or think. *Eirōneia* dissimulates, it is the act of questioning by feigning ignorance, by pretending.' [GD 76]

This is no longer simply a comment on Bartleby or on Kierkegaard. It relates now to Derrida's own writing. By suppressing his own voice, in bringing together this network of authors someone or something else is to speak. An intrigue is underway.

The book concludes with a proliferation of voices, including the appearance of the author, as the phrase, *tout autre est tout autre*, is interrogated and appropriated. As a consequence, theoretical distinctions central to Levinas's system are displaced and *demystified*. Derrida's achievement is to generate a reading of Levinas which does not exactly domesticate him, but allows him to be situated in a context, a tradition, or on the terrain where a choice is demarcated. Appearing in the final pages, Baudelaire and Nietzsche serve to illustrate what has had to be bracketed off for this problem to be constructed – the problem of credence, credulity and credit which marks the secular situation. The thematic extraction of passages which ignores this framing device is doomed: the whole essay in its engagement with "God" and theology, operates under a global *concesso non dato*.

The secret economy of Christianity cannot escape the economy of gift that will at some point be returned. Its internal secret eschews exteriority for the gaze of God who will reward in the next life. Derrida concludes with the question of whether we know what believing means or whether we think it is all make-believe [*à moins qu'il n'entende le faire accroire*]. Derrida heightens a problem not often noted by commentators: what would it mean to choose between these contesting positions? And moreover, what would it mean to present that choice such that it achieved the level of *philosophical* presentation? With respect to the second question, the deflationary collapse of philosophy into opinions the



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individual 'philosopher' holds is here resisted. 'As often happens, the call of or for the question, and the request that echoes through it, takes us further than the response.' [GD 115] Not everything uttered by those taken for philosophers counts as philosophy, except in the limited sense of world-view. I take this to be an example of what Hobson means by a 'dynamic demonstration' of paradoxes [OL 222] that does not reduce to discursive or thematic meaning [OL 211].

As the inheritor of critical as opposed to dogmatic philosophy, Derrida here exposes the limits of philosophical reason. In approaching the issues raised by Levinas, we begin to see the difficulty in referencing "Judaism" and "Christianity" as if they named discrete objects. In addition, Derrida raises the question that philosophy might be comprised by a doubled gesture of repeating religion *without the religious* [GD 49-50]. The contiguous reading of Patočka, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Levinas emphasises the difficulty of winnowing philosophical content from theological. Akin to the structuring of *Fear and Trembling*, *The Gift of Death* concludes with this disjunction unresolved by philosophy: what does it mean to decide and distinguish between the two economies? How do we understand the Levinasian *production* of the Good on earth in contrast to the decision to store up treasures to be rewarded by the order to come? Further, how do we understand Levinas with respect to the Christian theological tradition which has been polarised around these very questions? If there is a repetition of the religious without religion, is it a one-time repetition – a single bound to free ourselves? Or is it an iteration? A slow eradication of that which still determines philosophical thinking in surreptitious ways.

To recap, the reservation of authorial opinion performs the aporetic conclusions limned above. As a performative critique of Levinas's methodology, it highlights the inadequacy of phenomenological intuition when faced with these questions and decisions. Instead, such macro-systematics must be addressed through an examination of the history of philosophy and theology. The restoration of a genealogical, hermeneutic dimension addresses the amnesia to which Levinas appears as a novel thinker, but it does not coalesce into the reflection of the subject.



### 'A Word of Welcome'

In many ways, Derrida's essay in six parts, 'Word of Welcome' is deserving of a book-length commentary. It deals with an enormous number of Levinasian themes while proceeding out of the seemingly innocent gesture of examining the trope of hospitality in Levinas's work. For the purposes of this chapter, I will examine only certain structural features while paying particular attention to the interruption of the Levinasian context by the figure of Kant, who introduces the immigrant or visitor into the politics of the Other.

As in *The Gift of Death*, 'Word of Welcome' is marked by the complicated movement of Derrida's own voice – often it seems to retract behind philological motivations only to appear at points where this philological movement has pushed certain problems to the fore. In many ways, one could read this gesture as fundamental to Derrida's later engagement with Levinas. I mentioned hermeneutics above, but we could also see here an echo of Derrida's insistence on the relation of the third as it introduces justice in the ethical relation. Levinas is abused if he is not read in relation to the tradition: to that extent it is more important to allow the tradition to appear in the writing.

Early in the essay, Derrida turns to the issue of the third [*le tiers*] and pursues a reading that builds to the point where the necessity of justice inaugurated troubles the originary ethical relation. Derrida asks whether there is not an aporia here: the third interrupts the face to face and protects against the 'vertigo of ethical violence'. Although Derrida does not develop the problematic as I have done earlier in this thesis, his analysis coheres with that there. Except that he intensifies the aporia at the heart of the speculative enterprise by insisting that the ethical relation itself (that is where the relation to the third is subtracted) would be beyond good or evil [*Adieu* 32-33]. This seems to be precisely the problem of fanaticism, and one could agree that it is crucial to understanding Levinas's "ethics" to insist on this non-moral aspect of the encounter with the idea of infinity. But in the call for justice that is motivated by this encounter with the infinite, Derrida notes that the third commits the subject to an initial



ontological perjury<sup>30</sup>. Perjury is not a theme for Levinas, but the possible delusion of the encounter with the infinite in the face of the Other demands its production in the finite as apology or ipseity. This does betray something of the initial encounter, but what guides Levinas is the religious inheritance such that he has faith that the perjury, the institutionalisation, will not involve running such a great risk.

For Derrida this produces a 'scandal': '... in the operation of justice one can no longer distinguish between fidelity to oath and the perjury of false witness, and even before this, between betrayal and betrayal, always more than one betrayal' [*Adieu* 34]. Although Derrida notes that he is far now from Levinas, this problem has been produced from an immanent reading: the commentary has intensified a certain problem, from which Derrida then moves away (that is, away from Levinas) towards his *own* problematic. Levinas holds to the line that one can distinguish the law that betrays the Other from the law that preserves it. Derrida instead insists that this is not possible, it is always marked by pervertibility:

'This spectral "possibility" is not however, the abstraction of a liminal pervertibility. It would rather be the *impossibility* of controlling, deciding, or determining a limit, *the impossibility* of situating, by means of criteria, norms, or rules a tenable threshold separating pervertibility from perversion. This impossibility is *necessary*. It is necessary that this threshold should not be at the disposal of a general knowledge or a regulated technique.' [*Adieu* 35]

Here, we find the repetition of the theme of 'At this Very Moment ...': the logic of pervertibility in the relation between the Other and justice is the same logic (or 'syntax' in Hobson's terms [*OL* 3]) as that of *sériature*. And in addition, it is not at the disposal of introspection or intentional analysis, since it is precisely at this point that the self-certainty of intentionality has been ruptured. As Derrida notes, the possible hospitality to the 'worst' cannot be closed off in advance. For Derrida responsibility is thereby intensified, since it cannot be regulated by what sets it in motion.

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<sup>30</sup> See also Derrida "Le Parjure," *Perhaps: Storytelling and Telling* [2000] translated by Peggy Kamuf in *Without Alibi* edited by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002). pp. 161-201.



But this theme of perjury and the third registers at a different level. For we might present Derrida's own writing presentation here in its consistent conjuncture as perjuring fidelity to Levinas – a fidelity to Levinas again and again demands a 'fidelity to more than one memory' [*Adieu* 45]. Writing *itself* becomes a hospitality to other authors.

And chief amongst these other authors is Kant. In emphasising the theme of hospitality at the heart of reason and the possibility opened thereby for peace – Levinas invites comparison with the former's essay on those very themes<sup>31</sup>. It is in this complex interrelationship that Derrida develops the following question: How can infinite and unconditional hospitality be regulated in a particular political or juridical practice? That is, how does the ethical interact with the political? This question assumes a greater importance from the contemporary political setting in which Derrida is writing, where the French government had just made it a criminal offence to take in an illegal immigrant.

Kant, seemingly following Hobbes, takes war to be a natural condition on which peace must be instantiated: that is, peace does not come to a halt without a political order being imposed. Kant's essay, 'Toward Perpetual Peace', outlines the juridical and republican conditions necessary for such a structure. Among these strictures, hospitality is limited to a right to temporary sojourn – this right is not natural and amounts only to a right to visit another territory.

For Levinas, such a universal hospitality would only ever be juridical or political and hence limit the unconditional welcoming of the other. In addition, the cosmopolitan constitution will only be approached indefinitely. This deferral to indefinite progress is at odds with the political instantiation required to give meaning to the world. The institutions desired by Kant would retain the trace of natural hostility and be subject to the collapse into the State as totality. In contrast, Derrida is concerned to reposition the importance of specific institutional conditions as conditions of possibility for hospitality.

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<sup>31</sup> Immanuel Kant 'Toward Perpetual Peace' [1795] in *Practical Philosophy* translated & edited by Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 311-351.



Kant defines the limitations and conditions of the state: Levinas commences from the encounter with the face of the Other in peace. Derrida describes this encounter as an 'immediate and quasi-immanent interruption in the illeity of the third' [*Adieu* 90]. In the ten pages that conclude Section V [*Adieu* 91-101], Kant and Levinas are read across each other along this point of departure. The juridical concept of peace produced by the state *versus* Levinas's invocation of a peace that precedes the 'labour of the negative'. In contrast to de Vries, I resist the urge to push this chiasmus into a syncretist position to reach a theory of modern institutions. This tension is more directed at a contemporary theory of communicative action to which Levinas's excess would be a rebarbative reminder of what might be lost in such practices of consensus. This is a problem that would require much more detailed treatment than can be undertaken here<sup>32</sup>. I will instead briefly demarcate certain disagreements:

1. Kant is invoked as a corrective to Levinas, rather than vice versa<sup>33</sup>. The unpreventable problem of pervertibility in Levinas's intuition requires more engagement with the institutions of the law – it cannot succeed as a different spirit animating those structures. To this end, Derrida's distinction between law (*loi*) and justice *as law* (*droit*) is already more nuanced than the notion of justice and law taken over by Levinas without much redevelopment; this political insufficiency in Levinas's work is recognised by de Vries<sup>34</sup>.
2. Derrida does not understand Levinas to have been able to achieve what he claims to have done. In this way, it is difficult to agree that the 'most important threads of Derrida's argument' are 'distilled' from *Totality and Infinity*<sup>35</sup>. Chiefly, Derrida does not appear to side with a reading that would find the structure of welcome presupposed in phenomenality and

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<sup>32</sup> De Vries accepts that he pushes his surveyed authors beyond what they might mean and also concentrates on Derrida's writings on the university, which I am unable to do here.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. de Vries *Religion and Violence* p. 294.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 307.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 16.



intelligibility<sup>36</sup>. The imposition of welcome into intelligibility would be an external imposition – itself a mutation: 'That is indeed a mutation, a leap, a radical but discreet and paradoxical heterogeneity introduced into phenomenology by the ethics of hospitality.'<sup>37</sup> [*Adieu* 51]

3. In mortgaging his reading of Derrida to a religious interpretation, de Vries perhaps misses the critical dimension of Derrida's relation to its institutions. Those forms inherited from religious traditions are precisely those unable to escape from logocentrism.

Derrida's reservations regarding Levinas can be discerned from both the questions he poses to Levinas and the example he chooses to develop. Derrida asks where one can find the 'mediating schema' (note the Kantian language) between the face-to-face and the politics which provides its 'framework'. How does the "beyond the State" become instantiated in the "State"? His example, developed earlier, is the relation between Israel and Palestine, where one speaks of a peace process [*Adieu* 91-92].

These are the crucial questions, since Levinas marks his distance from Kierkegaard and Rosenzweig along this fault line – the manifestation of goodness cannot simply equate to the protests of an egoist subjectivity 'still concerned with happiness or salvation' [*TI* 305 quoted at *Adieu* 94]. Somehow the peace that 'starts from an I and goes to the other' does not succumb to this danger (over which Hegelian universalism would be superior – as Levinas himself notes). However, in the earlier imposition of perjury, Derrida insists that any political instantiation has to betray the particularity of the original epiphany: 'The violence of the political mistreats the face yet again by effacing its unicity in a generality.' Politics can therefore never be 'left to itself', but again Derrida remarks that this topology is now 'rather convoluted' [*Adieu* 98]. The State provides the framework but, since it cannot do so in such a way as to preserve an 'enclave of transcendence', this limit is no longer tenable:

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<sup>36</sup> Nor for that matter would Levinas without explicit demarcation of the 'intelligibility' of proximity from the intelligibility of being.

<sup>37</sup> See Appendix B for a discussion of the manner in which 'mutation' registers.



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'We spoke earlier of an enclave of transcendence. The border between the ethical and the political here loses for good the indivisible simplicity of a limit. No matter what Levinas might have said, the determinability of this limit was never pure, and it never will be.... A hyperbolic transgression brings about a disjunction in the immanence to self.' [Adieu 99]

In what again returns to the repeated critique offered by Derrida, Levinas has recourse to a language drawn from Kant (war, peace, hostility, hospitality, ethics, politics, law, justice), even at the moment when he is opposing Kant, for example, with respect to the value of 'conatus'<sup>38</sup>.

It is not that this marks a sceptical contradiction: it is that he has not justified this borrowing. The language operates as a shorthand which deflects critical attention. To be explicit, Kant limits the analysis of peace to the cosmopolitan constitution which would preserve it. Levinas, in aspiring to a pre-political concept of peace, effaces the difficulties thus generated for incorporating it back into a political framework, *which he nevertheless invokes to differentiate him from the "egoism" of Kierkegaard and Rosenzweig*. In particular, given that no process is specified which moves from the "ethical" to the "political", his writings on Israel would seem to gain in importance as examples of the articulation of the pertinent features of a state of justice. But, as Derrida repeatedly notes, he seems to lapse into uncritical optimism in treating Zionism as something more than a nationalism. As argued in Chapter Two, there appears to be no critical space from within Levinas's own position to evaluate political frameworks. As for Derrida himself, he seems to want something quite different:

'Our task here is simply – between Kant and Levinas – to sharpen a difference that matters today more than ever with regard to this right of refuge and all the most urgent matters of our time, everywhere that – in Israel, in Rwanda, in Europe, in America, in Asia, in all the Churches of St. Bernard in the world – millions of "undocumented immigrants", of "homeless", call out for another international law, another border politics, another humanitarian politics, indeed a humanitarian commitment that *effectively* operates beyond the interests of Nation-States.' [Adieu 101]

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<sup>38</sup> Kant: nature works towards its goal through self-seeking actions of individuals; the conflict of unpeaceable dispositions leads towards submission to otherwise coercive law without inner morality.



## Chapter 6 Conjunctural Writings – Derrida's later writing on Levinas

The achievement of Levinas is to bring the idea of wider, universal hospitality back into play [*Adieu* 3]. But a purely juridical concept of cosmopolitanism is insufficient without a rethinking of the right to visit and citizenship (especially when as Derrida notes the difference between an economic and a political migrant is more than ever harder to discern). So the invocation of the face and welcome, requires breaking with both the 'sweet dream of the pacifist philosopher' and the philosophy that is unable to interrogate Israeli state policy.

Levinas's commentary is liberated from that structure towards a new thought of politics that recognises that the Nation-state will never open itself to hospitality without restriction [*Adieu* 89-90]. The 'hospitable France' that welcomed Levinas is no longer participating in the 'messianic order' [*Adieu* 72]<sup>39</sup>. And, further, this hospitality has been moved from that offered to the stranger in one's domicile to concrete political questions facing us today – a political inflection of Levinas's problematic out beyond the ethical. Contra de Vries, by highlighting these 'allusions', in an opposition to political positivism, or political precautions and cautions, Derrida's political mutation of Levinas presages an intelligibility to come that would think law and politics otherwise and calls for another institutional politics.

### Cosmopolitanism

If Derrida, in *Adieu*, says that Levinas is against cosmopolitanism, what does it mean for Derrida to adopt that as his call? Derrida's essay, '*Cosmpolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!*' is the near contemporary of 'A Word of Welcome'. It was delivered at the International Parliament of Writers in 1996 and published in France the following year. It contains many of the references found in the essay discussed above but instantiates a more direct call for the reinvigoration of the traditional concept of the City of Refuge [*ville refuge*] in face of recent crackdowns on migrants in France and Europe.

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<sup>39</sup> 'One belongs to the messianic order when one has been able to admit others among one's own.' Levinas *In the Time of the Nations* translated by Michael B. Smith (London. The Athlone Press, 1994), p. 98 & pp. 113-14.



## Chapter 6 Conjunctural Writings – Derrida's later writing on Levinas

Here I highlight the development of the themes discussed above, following Kant's trajectory as it marks a departure from Levinas. The City of Refuge is adopted by Derrida for several reasons:

- the idea of the city of refuge has a long history within Europe;
- there now appear to be more transformational possibilities at the horizon of the city rather than the state;
- it registers with 'those who cultivate an "ethic of hospitality"'.

Firstly, let us briefly note that the long history of the city of refuge bridges several traditions: Derrida concentrates on Greek Stoicism, Pauline Christianity and Enlightenment political thought. The insistence on Paul and Kant at the crossing of these traditions perhaps allows us to note the absence *here* of reference to the Judaic tradition; or rather, this element of Judaism has already been incorporated into the Christian tradition – it is not simply Greek, and perhaps need no lessons in Hebrew. In 'Violence and Metaphysics' Derrida attempted to contest Levinas's reading of the history of Western philosophy, here the references to a *conflicting* tradition of hospitality *within* Christian thought tacitly reject Levinas's monolithic history of the same *and* suggests that we do not need to translate Hebrew ethical concepts into modern philosophy – the tradition already has the resources. That the modern philosophical tradition contains moments of rupture and break is illustrated by reference to Kant's *Besuchsrecht*, which is based on the principle of 'common right of possession' to the surface of the earth – a principle of which it is always necessary to be reminded given the contemporary liberal appropriation of Kant.

More importantly, Derrida offers, again tacitly, an important gloss on his reading of Levinas:

"To cultivate an ethic of hospitality" – is such an expression not tautologous? Despite all the tensions or contradictions which distinguish it, and despite all the perversions that can befall it, one cannot speak of cultivating an ethic of hospitality. Hospitality is culture itself and not simply one ethic amongst others. Insofar as it has to do with the *ethos*, that is, the residence, one's home, the familiar place of dwelling, inasmuch as it is a matter of being there, the manner in which we relate to ourselves and to



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others, to others as our own or as foreigners, *ethics is hospitality* .... But for this very reason, and because being at home with oneself ... supposes a reception or inclusion of the other which one seeks to appropriate, control, and master according to different modalities of violence, there is a *history* of hospitality, an always possible perversion of *the* law of hospitality (which can appear unconditional), and of the *laws* which come to limit and condition it in its inscription as a law.' [Cosmo 16-17]

Perhaps one can push this passage too far, but is it innocent to introduce the word culture here? In light of the analysis presented earlier, where the anti-relativism of Levinas was developed and stressed, can we not see a double charge to the introduction of both history and law? If there is no ethic of hospitality that can be cultivated, then has the principle by which one was able to judge been removed? Derrida explicitly argues that there is a history of the culture and *laws* pertaining to hospitality; consequently hospitality is not transparent to the first person perspective of the individual. Not only is there no transcendent principle, but the *conditioned perversion* of hospitality can always appear as *unconditional*. To this extent genealogy, rather than phenomenology, is required.

As the essay concludes, Derrida italicises his belief in the importance of a politics of *experience and experimentation*. This practice takes place within the law, within the tradition.

'It is a question of knowing how to transform and improve the law, and of knowing if this improvement is possible within an historical space which takes place *between* the Law of an unconditional hospitality, offered *a priori* to every other, to all newcomers, *whoever they may be*, and *the* conditional laws of a right to hospitality, without which *The* unconditional Law of hospitality would be in danger of remaining a pious and irresponsible desire, without form and without potency, and of even being perverted at any moment.' [Cosmo 22-23]

If we have been correct in our analysis of Levinas, then here we can see an enormous structural point of differentiation. Politics as transformed by Levinas is the production of the idea of the infinite qua strategic imposition on being, or the construction of an ipseity foreign to it – what exists and its history are *inert* material to be transformed, surpassed or evaded. For Derrida, historical space (of philosophy and more generally) is differently constituted. From Derrida's perspective, Levinas still appears idealist to the extent that the *idea* of the infinite



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as unconditioned remains suspect. *There is no possibility of justifying this idea except through its realisation and its resonance with a certain religious tradition.*

Derrida refuses to appeal to a transcendent idea to guide a speculative projection from out of history and tradition. While Levinas projects a future, where a conceptual system and strategy are to be implemented, Derrida works *negatively* with the minimal opposition to any thinking that wallows in or valorises immanentism. The future-to-come, *avenir* as opposed to *futur*, has neither the guarantee of the religious tradition nor the inspiration of or aspiration to a divine moment. The weak messianism, messianic without messianism, merely holds out hope for something better than this here now, while recognising that there is the risk of the monstrous, the unanticipated, the worse. Yet there are those (and they occupy the majority position) for whom the current order is already deserving of those epithets.

Similarly, Derrida's insistence on fractured and twisted, plural temporalities (in *Specters of Marx*) contests Levinas's subjective perception of past, present and future (received from grammatical categories), since, for Derrida, the *avenir* may have already arrived without its recognition (and it perhaps should not be too quickly conceived as singular). Alternatively, Derrida's future as *avenir* names the arrival of what is unanticipated as event; Levinas's future is the programmatic institutionalisation of "religion" – that which prevents the idea of the Infinite from being a delusion.

From this reading of 'A Word of Welcome' and 'On Cosmopolitanism', we can mark Derrida's distance from Levinas with respect to history and political philosophy. This transforms the respective conceptions of the other: Derrida is chiefly concerned with the other as *Autre* – the other in its otherness (*heteron*) as that which breaks from or is suppressed by the current instantiation. Any political philosophy for Derrida must begin from a critique of current law oriented by a concern for exceptions and singularity; Levinas's stress on the priority of the encounter with the "transcendent" is always subject to possible appropriation by the dominant ideology – this is the danger of religion espoused by Levinas and de Vries.



### 'Force of Law'

In contesting the general idea of Levinas's influence over Derrida, much space has had to be devoted to textual analysis. This is due in part to the subtle and insightful works of Robert Bernasconi. Often his dense essays will cover a great deal of ground and open up new and interesting vistas in footnotes or brief asides. One such essay is his analysis of Derrida's reference to "justice" in 'Force of Law'. 'Justice without Ethics' rests at little over ten pages, but surveys the trajectory of Derrida's writings in relation to Levinas, while concentrating on the manner in which Derrida's analyses of the relationship between justice and law mirror Levinas's examination of ethics and justice<sup>40</sup>.

Bernasconi correctly notes that too little attention has been paid to the manner in which the third interrupts the face-to-face in its demand for justice. Similarly, attention to the differences hidden by the homonym, "justice", is crucial to any understanding of the relationship between Derrida and Levinas: for Levinas, justice is institutionalised negotiation between competing demands, whereas, Derrida introduces the further distinction between justice as law (*droit*) and that 'justice' which is concerned with what escapes the instantiation of law, yet resonates with the demand of that institution.

However, in a strange coda, Bernasconi breaks off from this patient reading and refers to the recent publication of *Specters of Marx*<sup>41</sup>. Hesitating before Derrida's admonition (from 'Passions') not to seek to reconstitute morality under the aegis of deconstruction, Bernasconi refers to 'genuine parallels' with Levinas, which however have a 'difference of focus'. In this concluding paragraph, he worries that the references to a justice "beyond being" in *Specters of Marx* mean that the affinity between Levinas and Derrida is more fundamental than his analysis has suggested. Bernasconi concludes with two points:

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<sup>40</sup> 'Justice without Ethics', *Responsibilities of Deconstruction* (Pli: Warwick Journal of Philosophy volume 6) edited by Jonathon Dronsfield & Nick Midgley (Summer 1997), pp. 58-69.

<sup>41</sup> 'We would be left marking the difference between Derrida's justice and Levinas's ethics, and yet at the same time showing certain similarities in the way they are presented, were it not for another text by Derrida that has recently appeared.' [ibid. p. 67]



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1. For the victims of oppression, any distinction between Levinasian "ethics" and Derridean "justice" 'makes no sense'.
2. The political engagement of *Specters of Marx* forces Derrida into using concepts which return Derrida to the charge he himself levelled at Levinas back in 'Violence and Metaphysics': a failure to submit these concepts to genealogical investigation. By which I take him to be suggesting that his inheritance from Levinas is left unexamined (indeed, there are only two direct references to Levinas in the entire book).

In some ways, my thesis as a whole is directed against the first point. My aim is to demonstrate the systematic differences between the *speculative* projects of Levinas and Derrida. I would suggest that it is a major deficiency of Bernasconi's essay that he does not examine the central problem of temporality in *Specters of Marx* as it chimes with what Derrida has previously written on Levinas. As was pointed out in our examination of 'On Cosmopolitanism', we are dealing with two fundamentally distinct models of political time. That is why the apparently straightforward reference to justice beyond being in Derrida is misplaced. Against the idea that justice comes from without and is imposed on being (Levinas), Derrida stresses the fractured, discontinuous nature of what is given in its historicity and temporality – it is from out of the experienced disjunctions of this tradition that "justice" appears. First the law in its contradictions, whereas Levinas first has the idea of the infinite.

The following reading of 'Force of Law' will attempt to draw out this structure. It will do so by insisting on the *methodology* adopted by Derrida. Bernasconi notes that Levinas nowhere conducts a genealogy of his concepts, but does not realise that this is not an accidental missed opportunity<sup>42</sup>. It marks a fundamental structural schism between the two projects. Similarly, the importance of citation in Derrida is not simply used to justify his writing with reference to precedents or authorities: it emphasises the fragmentary tradition which cannot be reduced to the history of ontology as domination of the Other by the Same: the tradition is

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 60.



already other to itself. Fundamentally, Levinas remains limited in its dependence on the first-person perspective of the subject, whereas genealogy is a methodology that responds to the discovery of a lack of transparency (the illusion of *Sinngebung*) in passive synthesis. Levinas frees words from their historical determinations because he nowhere asks the question of the subject's ability to use language and nowhere troubles himself with the justification of that language.

The first stage for Derrida is mapping – where is it that the subject finds itself. It is no coincidence that many of Derrida's essays stop at the point where philosophical presentation ends and decision begins<sup>43</sup>. Although Bernasconi often mentions Derrida's insistence on differences in idiom and language, no attempt is made to do justice to these sentences by positioning them at a systematic level. This is mirrored by a failure to examine the formal structure of the essays from which Bernsconi draws his evidence. Here, we shall examine the *movement* of “justice” across ‘Force of Law’.

This essay has attracted attention because within its pages appears the statement: deconstruction is justice. I will argue that to isolate this fragment is illegitimate. The word “justice” is subject to a variety of transformations within the text. My aim will be to try to articulate the importance of this formal structural effect. In this way, I develop Hobson's idea that ‘justice’ in ‘Force of Law’ is a ‘strange attractor’ [OL 145-46 & 232]. I attempt to cash this out with reference to the critical relation to the history of philosophy thus demonstrated.

‘Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundation of Authority”’ is published in two sections which were delivered on two occasions during 1989-1990. The second

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<sup>43</sup> Bernasconi has the acumen to register the manner in which Derrida turns to Kierkegaard. ‘Perhaps one could argue that Derrida sees Kierkegaard as the third party who looks at him in the eyes of Levinas.’ [ibid. p. 69. fn. 22] Unfortunately this remains an undeveloped *aperçu*. Yet, it touches on the heart of the matter, Derrida refuses to allow Levinas to write in the bracketed-off absence of the philosophical tradition. Derrida also sees other writers in the eyes of Levinas, but Kierkegaard provides a telling comparison in many ways. As we have repeatedly tried to demonstrate, the understanding of deconstruction as *clôtural* reading reduces *both* Derridean *and* Levinasian philosophy to the *recognition* of the simultaneously necessity and impossibility of interrupting the current instantiation of being. As has been argued here, in fact, both writers reject the reduction of philosophical practice to recognition or reminders of the structure of the given, and instead wrestle with the problem of transformation.



part is a close reading of Benjamin's essay from 1921, 'Critique of Violence'. I have elsewhere examined at length the reading of Benjamin contained therein and suggested that it is ill-served by either Derrida's admirers or those opposed to deconstruction<sup>44</sup>. Here I will concentrate on the first section, subtitled 'Of the Right to Justice / From Law to Justice'.

In a familiar manner, Derrida begins his reflection on the relationship between deconstruction and justice (a title he did not choose himself), with an extended detour on the differences between French, German and English in addressing this problem. He notes that it is difficult to translate the German *Gewalt* into English or French without losing the specific register of law, authority, violence and force. Similarly the English expression 'to *enforce* the law' is rendered into French as '*appliquer la loi*' – the connection of force and law is lost.

This examination of idiom does not simply prepare the way for a consideration of the problem of the migrant or sojourner who falls foul of the laws of a foreign land. Or indeed the plight of the minority culture when forced to speak in the language of the majority. Derrida emphasises the material conditions of language which enable the development of certain themes: he insists that language and idiom is 'at the heart of what I say' [*FoL* 233]. Translation and attention to the argumentative moves available in a particular idiom form part of a concern with philosophical presentation. On this occasion, Derrida insists that such a concern for language is pertinent to the questions of justice and the law; that to consider these problems of translation and conceptuality underpins more concrete philosophical and legal problems.

In fact, Derrida proceeds to demonstrate that it is impossible to address justice except obliquely; something which he takes to have recurred throughout his writing career<sup>45</sup>. But this oblique strategy is not simply an anti-foundationalist scepticism regarding the possibility of a just instantiation, rather it strives at a

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<sup>44</sup> Andrew McGettigan *A Holy-Sober Violence: Walter Benjamin and the possibility of a Romantic political theory* MA, Middlesex University, 2001.

<sup>45</sup> 'It goes without saying that discourses on double affirmation, the gift beyond exchange and distribution, the undecidable, the incommensurable or the incalculable, on singularity, difference and heterogeneity are also, through and through, at least oblique discourses on justice.' [*FoL* 235]



form of intervention: 'Not to change things in the no doubt rather naïve sense of calculated, deliberate and strategically controlled intervention, but in the sense of maximum intensification of a transformation in progress, in the name of neither a simple symptom nor a simple cause; other categories are required here.' [FoL 236] Already here, the essay marks its difference from Levinas in this break with foreseen strategic imposition.

In seeking to intensify something that comes out of the tradition, Derrida begins with what Bernsconi notes is a rather 'unremarkable' citation from Pascal<sup>46</sup>. Again, we stress that it is far from innocuous that Derrida begins a section that will conclude with the evocation of Levinas with a quotation from the Christian tradition. Secondly, he begins with a citation that was expunged by the original compilers of the Port Royal tradition. Attempting to break from the dominant, conventional interpretation of this passage as an expression of nihilistic scepticism it becomes the point from which Derrida develops three aporiae. And finally, before moving on, the passage draws from a reading of Montaigne<sup>47</sup>.

So, to recap, the essay's second incipit, after the reflection on language and idiom, takes up a previously suppressed Pascalian *pensée* which has been constructed from a reading of Montaigne, but which can be brought into conversation with Rawls, Fish and Hart [FoL 242]. As Derrida notes it touches on an intrinsic structure of the relationship of justice and law.

The brief philological analysis of this gobbet has already demonstrated a structure in the history of philosophy which escapes Levinas's flat reading of that

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<sup>46</sup> op. cit. p. 66. '*Justice, force – Il est juste que ce qui est juste soit suivi, il est nécessaire que ce qui est le plus fort soit suivi. Justice sans la force est impuissante; la force sans la justice est tyrannique. La justice sans force est contredite, parce qu'il y a toujours des méchants; la force sans la justice est accusée. Il faut donc mettre ensemble la justice et la force: pour cela faire que ce qui est juste soit fort, ou que ce qui est fort soit juste. Et ainsi ne pouvant faire que ce qui est fort fût juste.*' (298, 470) *Pensées: Notes on Religion and Other Subjects* edited by Louis Lafuma [1947] translated by John Warrington (London, J.M. Dent & Sons. 1973).

<sup>47</sup> In a connected *pensée*, Pascal cites, without quotation marks, a phrase which says that custom is the 'mystical foundation of authority' – Derrida takes the subtitle of his essay from this phrase.



history. Further, and to develop Bernasconi's unimpressed reference to Pascal, this 'intrinsic structure' appears amenable to a common sense interpretation or as Derrida puts it, one could find in it a 'desedimentation of the superstructures of law that both hide and reflect the economic and political interests of the dominant forces of society' [*FoL* 241]. In putting together justice and law, the founding, performative moment of instantiating power is emphasised.

Derrida then argues that deconstruction is only possible because law is founded and constructed upon 'interpretable and transformable textual strata' *and* that its ultimate foundation is itself unfounded. This is the *mystical* moment of authority. Mystical in a Wittgensteinian sense, as Derrida himself notes. That is, its limit can be shown but it cannot be spoken about. It is important to stress this passage, as it comes before Derrida's notorious assertion that deconstruction is justice.

'In the structure I am here describing here [*sic*], law is essentially *deconstructible*, whether because it is founded, that is to say constructed, upon interpretable and transformable textual strata ... or because its ultimate foundation is by definition unfounded. The fact that law is deconstructible is not bad news. One may even find in this the political chance of all historical progress. But the paradox that I would like to submit for discussion is the following: it is the deconstructible structure of law or, if you prefer, justice as law, that also ensures the possibility of deconstruction. Justice in itself, if such a thing exist, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible. No more than deconstruction itself, if such a thing exist. *Deconstruction is justice.*' [*FoL* 242-243]

We should note here:

1. One could present a reading that stresses the opening subclause, which, in the emphasis on describing, suspends the question of proscription. The difference between ought and is runs through this essay: does Derrida offer a political theory of law and justice that is to be adopted? Or does he comment upon a structure we inhabit, unpicking aporiae immanent to common sense and a certain strand of tradition?
2. The reference to history should come to the fore. The impossibility of a just founding marks the movement of history. In contrast, Levinas seeks a just imposition that would be achieved as peace.



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3. Inquiry begins with the law and the contradictions of those strata forming it with their various, and sometimes subterranean, connections.
4. The reference to a justice outside or beyond *law* is not a justice outside or beyond *being*.
5. The references to justice and deconstruction have both been qualified by the fragment, "if such a thing exist" and glossed as a 'paradox ... submitted for discussion'.

It is vital to insist on the nature of the claims made by Derrida here. Deconstruction is only possible because of the historical, constructed nature of the given, whether it be language or law, etc.. Deconstruction is an analysis of convention and custom. But it does not simply show this limit and then restrain itself in a quietism. "Justice" has been underdeveloped so far in the essay – about ten pages in and it has not yet had any positive determination beyond this notion of 'undeconstructibility'. Of Pascal's own interpretation in terms of natural laws corrupted by advancing reason or a divine reason beyond human instantiations, neither appeals to Derrida [*FoL* 241]. It is not clear that it exists, but it seems to have been transformed into the *aspiration* for that which might escape the destructive conditions so far experienced in history: it becomes a demand for the impossible (or the not possible today). In a Heideggerian register, Derrida glosses it as a *call* [*FoL* 244]. The call is produced from out of the history of instantiations, and it is this which is preserved in deconstruction's activity.

'*Consequence*: Deconstruction takes place in the interval that separates the undeconstructibility of justice from the deconstructibility of law. Deconstruction is possible as an experience of the impossible, there where, even if it does not exist, if it is not *present*, not yet or never, *there is* justice. Wherever one can replace, translate, determine the *X* of justice, one would have to say: deconstruction is possible, as impossible, to the extent (there) where *there is X* (undeconstructible), thus to the extent (there) where *there is* (the undeconstructible).' [*FoL* 243]

What is the form or nature of this undeconstructible? What judgments frame it? The aporia developed at the end of the section present it in something akin to an apophantic logic – the undecidable, the incalculable – yet within the economy of the decidable and the calculable and indeed demanding of that economy,



inconsequential without it. Towards the close, Derrida evokes an 'emancipatory ideal' that cannot be disqualified, though needing re-elaboration, *without* 'thoughtlessness' and 'complicity' in the worst.

However unlike Heidegger the call is subjected to investigation. Not only is justice characterised as this positive aspiration, but deconstruction's concern for justice interrogates this call – to avoid hypostatising it in good conscience, normative interpretation, etc. Crucially, it is inflected so that it 'stops before any inherited determination of justice'. Derrida calls this moment the "first justice". Deconstruction is *already engaged* by justice and its demand, but one cannot allow this to rest at the level of '*mystique*', at the limit, or at the beyond:

'One must be *juste* with justice, and the first justice to be done is to hear it, to try to understand where it comes from, what it wants from us, knowing that it does so through singular idioms (*Dikē, Jus, justitia, justice, Gerechtigkeit*, to limit ourselves to European idioms, that it may also be necessary to delimit, in relation to others ...). One must know that this justice always addresses itself to singularity, to the singularity of the other, despite or even because it pretends to universality.' [FoL 248]<sup>48</sup>

To emphasise this first justice – the necessity of submitting to genealogy (not to mention anthropology and psychoanalysis 'to try to understand where it comes from') – displaces the valorisation found in Levinas of the infinite beyond being. '[A]lways to maintain a questioning of the origin, grounds and limits of our conceptual, theoretical or normative apparatus surrounding justice' seems perilously close to undermining the *sens* that gives meaning and direction to history. But this suspension, this *epochē*, in Derrida, marks the necessity of opposing the dogmatic slumber which endangers the Levinasian project. The subject determined by tradition, is a limited subject – subject to delusions.

It is this 'first justice' that prompts Derrida to suggest and *withdraw the idea* that nothing is more just today than deconstruction. It 'leads to a reinterpretation of the whole apparatus of limits within which a history and a culture have been able to confine their criteriology' [FoL 247]. Derrida equates this to the double

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<sup>48</sup> This passage is cited by Bernasconi as evidence of a Levinasian influence, but we should note that *autres*, here refers to other *languages* or *idioms* not other individuals.



movement of deconstruction and its writing practice. What is imposed and sedimented needs to be subject to a 'historical and interpretative memory'.

Before concluding with the aporiae, Derrida notes that there are mainly two styles of deconstruction (though, most often they are grafted together): 'One takes on the demonstrative and apparently ahistorical allure of logico-formal paradoxes. The other, more historical or more anamnestic, seems to proceed through readings of texts, meticulous interpretations and genealogies. Allow me to devote myself successively to both exercises.' [FoL 250] The aporiae follow the first and are therefore deficient with respect to the historical memory praised above but which 'suppose, make explicit or produce an unstable distinction between justice and law' a distinction, which as we have seen is inherited and taken up (a distinction, which he notes is not a 'true distinction')<sup>49</sup>.

There are three:

1. The *epochē* of the rule – if a decision is not to be simply programmed it must suspend the criteria it is using to judge; but if it uses no criterion it is only arbitrary rather than legitimate [FoL 251]<sup>50</sup>;
2. The ghost of undecidable – the decision to calculate or not, the decision over the criterion used, is not of the order of calculation; it is an ordeal or madness [FoL 253-54];

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<sup>49</sup> One should note the meta-level variation in strategy which means that David Wood's comments in 'Differance and the Problem of Strategy' are perhaps slightly awry. 'Derrida's general strategy is surely this: to infiltrate *differance* into the syntax of foundationalist and generative thinking with a view to depriving it of its attraction. (One might compare the release of sterile male mosquitos as an anti-malarial measure.) But once we realise this *is* the strategy, it is impossible to ask whether this substitutive infiltration is acceptable.' On Wood's reading, its "acceptability" would be premised upon its transcendentalism, but the disjunction he offers ignores the historical sensibility noted above. David Wood 'Differance and the Problem of Strategy' in *Derrida and Differance* edited by David Wood & Robert Bernasconi (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 63 – 70; pp. 64-5.

<sup>50</sup> 'This non-response conditions my responsibility, there where I alone must respond. Without silence, without the hiatus, which is not the absence of rules but the necessity of a leap at the moment of the ethical, political, or juridical decision, we could simply unfold knowledge into a program or course of action. Nothing could make us more irresponsible; nothing could be more totalitarian.' [Adieu 117]



3. Urgency obstructs the horizon of knowledge – we need a decision now; this expediency cuts through deliberation; there is no horizon of expectation or hope for increasing justice.

Derrida 'dryly addresses' these aporiae and then makes reference to Levinas in a manner that has been seized upon by Bernasconi: 'I would be tempted, up to a certain point, to bring the concept of justice ... closer to Levinas's.' What do we make of this strange expression? Derrida is tempted? And in the conditional? Derrida nods towards the notion of infinity and the 'heteronomic relation to the other [*autrui*]'; he connects Levinas's *droiture* to "law" to "address" to "direction" through an unspecified common relation. 'But since I would have other difficult questions about Levinas' difficult discourse, I cannot be content to borrow a conceptual trait without risking confusions or analogies. And so I will go no further in this direction.' [*FoL* 250] We could also note that Levinas has no deliberations around the concept of decision and its relation to subjective temporalization.

Given that a major concern of the previous pages has been to think about problems of philosophical discourse, this final reference needs to be considered. It operates as a retraction: he goes no further than registering a temptation. Bernasconi offers an interesting analysis of the quotation Derrida takes from *Totality and Infinity*, but seems to miss the nesting structure around this phrase. Bernasconi claims that Derrida 'attempts to enlist Levinas's support for' his concept of justice or that he 'appeals to Levinas's usage in order to *justify* his own adoption of the word 'justice''<sup>51</sup>. But Derrida does nothing of the sort, at most he nods towards a resonance, but one that cannot be systematically pursued because of his own difficult questions<sup>52</sup>. If anything, this passage should serve as a warning – to Bernasconi and Critchley – return to my earlier texts – do not be swayed by the superficial similarities of homonyms.

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* p. 61 & 63.

<sup>52</sup> Here we should note that to ask questions is not to eschew a critical moment even if such questions cannot be cashed out as concrete criticisms.



We might even ask what Bernasconi has to mind when he refers to Derrida's 'concept of justice': for it is not clear that any *concept* has been formulated unequivocally. It appears instead that "justice" has been exposed to a variety of considerations paratactically. By the second aporia, justice has mutated into an "idea of justice" against the presumption of present justice, but 'indestructible in its affirming character'. In a manner almost identical to that prized by Bernasconi in justifying the connection to Levinas, Derrida writes: 'I would hesitate to assimilate too quickly this "idea of justice" to a regulative idea in the Kantian sense, to whatever content of messianic promise ... or to other horizons of the same type.' [FoL 254] Derrida's treatment of justice seems to be constellated between several historical residues. As he admits, we appear to occupy a singular historical place where the "exemplifications" of these promised ideas or advents can be surveyed. Derrida offers the strange metaphor of the running track, where one is no longer running on the inside lane, but is not simply a spectator.

The final reference to Levinas appears in the third aporia, but in the context of a representation of the relation of law and justice in terms of the constative and the performative.

'Since every constative utterance itself relies, at least implicitly, on a performative structure ..., the dimension of *justesse* or truth of theoretico-constative utterances ... always thus presupposes the dimension of justice of the performative utterances, that is to say their essential precipitation, which never proceeds without a certain dissymmetry and some quality of violence. That is how I would be tempted to understand the proposition of Levinas, who, in a whole other language and following an entirely different discursive procedure, declares that "*la vérité suppose la justice*".' [FoL 256]

Again, Levinas is a possible temptation, but again this temptation is held at bay by the other language and 'discursive procedure' of Levinas. And let us note that it is only a 'proposition' (*la vérité suppose la justice*) and not one central to the system. Derrida concludes by displacing an "idea of justice" to a "perhaps", *continuing a deflationary trajectory* (a negative dialectics?). This "perhaps" contrasts *avenir* with *futur*, where the former marks an openness to the coming of the other (who is not yet here).



## Chapter 6 Conjunctural Writings – Derrida's later writing on Levinas

More intriguing, and not recognised by Bernasconi, is the possible tacit appropriation of Levinasian themes in the final two pages of the section.

1. The concept of excessive overflowing of the performative which is always presupposed in the constative appears to overwrite the opposition of the saying and the said found in *Otherwise than Being*<sup>53</sup>.
2. In particular, the operation of performative (as founding) and constative (as conserving) remains within history as an open, discontinuous system, which respects a structural urgency that must always be prepared to break with a 'horizon of expectation' [FoL 256]. Derrida contrasts *avenir* with *futur*, that is the open system contests the Levinasian idea of the infinite coming from outside of history and being produced within it. History is not simply an economic history of the Same.
3. Within history, alterity then takes on a different hue. No longer the wholly other that remains outside the order of the Same, alterity marks the difference (of idiom, demand, history) of the other. It is the other in its otherness as difference *within* the world that animates the demand for justice to submit to the "first justice" and the to-come of the event.
4. Of justice, Derrida writes: 'Abandoned to itself, the incalculable and giving idea of justice is always very close to the bad, even to the worst for it can always be reappropriated by the most perverse calculation.' [FoL 257] If there is a temptation to draw close to Levinas, let us note that Derrida's emphasis doubles back; on the one hand, if there are 'tears that a functionary cannot see', then, on the other, justice cannot be left to the retortion of the victim or the vigilante. Should one not read this admonition in light of the discussion of Levinas's relation to Zionism in 'A Word of Welcome'? In particular, if Derrida does not share Levinas's opinions and judgments, and if his "political culture" is completely different, what does this mean for calculation?

I conclude with a further quotation, which is the final enunciation of theoretical endeavour. It is not always correct to stress the final statement, but in this essay.

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<sup>53</sup> We have already emphasised the manner in which the pair of constative and performative contest Levinas's own pairing of Saying and Said – see Chapter Five.



it is no less correct than concentrating on the isolated claim that deconstruction is justice. The structure of the essay is complex but appears as a critical dialectical deflation of the notion of justice into something perhaps more amenable to the emancipatory demands of the day:

'Not only *must* one [*il faut*] calculate, negotiate the relation between the calculable and the incalculable, and negotiate without a rule that would not have to be reinvented there where we are "thrown", there where we find ourselves; but one *must* [*il faut*] do so and take it as far as possible, beyond the place we find ourselves and beyond the already identifiable zones of morality, political, or law, beyond the distinctions between national and international, public and private, and so on. The order of this *il faut* does not *properly* belong either to justice or to law. It only belongs to either realm by exceeding each one in the direction of the other, which means that in their very heterogeneity, these two orders are indissociable: *de facto* and *de jure*.' [FoL 257]

If indissociable, it is not clear that they mark two distinct orders or even poles which necessarily mediate each other. The *il faut* of negotiation is a minimal structure of attention and response to difference which might seem to come close to pragmatism (or pragmaticism) were it not for the demand to 'go as far as possible' beyond the anchors of common sense discourse in these areas. This displacement complicates the relationship of deconstruction and justice. As 'hyper-aporetic' '[i]t would be the arche-preliminary condition of another experience or another interpretation of friendship, and, by this very fact, the condition, at least negative, of another political thought – that is, another thought of decision and responsibility as well.' [PoF 199] One could possibly identify deconstruction exclusively with the "first justice" which submits instantiated institutions, languages and concepts to investigation; this final section troubles this understanding through consideration of the third aporia of urgency. It is this urgency which intensifies the question of responsibility and strategy, the very parameters of writing.

### Philosophical *Écriture* versus Ethico-Political Theory

Writing on different levels is perhaps the key structural feature of *The Politics of Friendship*. We can pick out three here, though there are more that one could isolate. Firstly, one could examine the references to Nietzsche regarding the



future-to-come and the task of philosophy – whether one is a posthumous writer. Can we discuss the possibility of a 'new species of philosopher' [*PoF* 34] whose arrival might be prepared by a new, rigorous thinking of the 'perhaps' [*PoF* 26]? Does friendship to 'those who are not yet here' inaugurate a responsibility that would contest the friendship of the present? How does a 'to-come that precedes the present' relate to the Heideggerean ek-stasis of the future that produces the present in its passage to the 'having-been'<sup>54</sup>? How does it relate to the contingent historical judgment that today 'we need to be scarecrows'? How can the writing of the 'to-come' avoid invoking 'unrecognisable enemies' [*PoF* 42] in favour of 'a new language or new use for old words' that would advance peace [*Adieu* 47]?

Secondly, the genealogical investigation into the philosophical use of the concept of fraternity in ethics and theories of communal bonding could be seen as a demonstration of the heterogeneity of a tradition [*PoF* 233], the effects of which are unstable in the present and not locked down by a unified discourse or intention. In this regard, Levinas's evocation of a fraternity beyond blood and race might still remain 'andro-phratro-phallego-centric' – these tropes are not simply determined by, or dependent on, explicit biological theories<sup>55</sup>. This philological work is the pre-condition for a philosophical move, 'springboard for a leap further out' [*PoF* 234], emphasizing that the material limiting conditions of this tradition are not overcome by a single conceptual leap or by a reflexive self-awareness or reminder. Though not explicitly referencing Levinas, *The Politics of Friendship* should be seen as extending the brief comments towards the end of 'At this Very Moment ...' where Derrida rebuts a particular gesture made by Levinas on his commentary on Genesis: 'And God Created Woman ...'<sup>56</sup>. In a reading barely departing from the intellectual rigour of James

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<sup>54</sup> See Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* §65 'Temporality as the ontological meaning of care', pp. 370-80. Though in Derrida this is neither related to self-projection nor to a resolute, authentic relation towards death.

<sup>55</sup> cf. Visker *Truth and Singularity* p. 314. In *Rogues*, Derrida asks why one, and Nancy specifically, would seek to preserve the 'figure of the father and the brother' in the trope of fraternity [*Rogues* 58-9].

<sup>56</sup> Emmanuel Levinas 'And God created Woman' in *Nine Talmudic Readings* [1970] translated by Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 169-76.



Brown's 'It's a Man's World', woman is defined by being created second: she comes after man and is a home for man. It concludes by noting that in coming second in creation, after man, woman is 'not thereby slighted' since second is still pretty good. Disingenuously attempting to forestall criticism of these sentiments, Levinas notes that he is merely *commenting* on these passages. Derrida firmly points out that 'commentary is not neutral': '... the position of commentator corresponds to a choice: to at least accompany and not displace, transform ...' [*ECM* 42]. And here, Levinas in no way distances himself from what is affirmed in those ancient books.

Thirdly, this suspicion of fraternity does not render all it inhabits unusable. Citing figures such as Blanchot and Nancy, Derrida notes that their attempts to rethink the community are amongst those he values most but still they persist in valorising 'fraternity' without sufficiently taking responsibility for its history [*PoF* 46-47 fn. 15]<sup>57</sup>. This meditation on the community does not result in any guaranteed outcome or programme, sometimes thinking does not reach such conclusions: it may be important to say things which are 'insane and absurd' and exposed to the derision of 'philosophical good conscience' [*PoF* 42].

I seek to demonstrate the thematic and structural variety of writing in this text troubled by the future, inherited past and present demands. In its original form, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* concluded with an analysis of the 'political impasse' of Derridean deconstruction<sup>58</sup>. In the preface to the second edition, Critchley modifies his position by noting that he is more doubtful about the 'persuasive force' of Levinasian ethics and in light of the publication by Derrida of *Specters of Marx* and *Politics of Friendship*, he is 'more positive about political possibilities of deconstruction'. But he still persists with a particular problem: how does one account for the passage from the deconstruction of

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<sup>57</sup> Maurice Blanchot *The Unavowable Community* [1983] translated by Pierre Jons; Tarrytown (New York), Station Hill Press, 1988. *The Inoperative Community* [1986, 1990] edited by Peter Connor, translated by Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland & Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1991)

<sup>58</sup> See also Giorgio Agamben's opposition to deconstruction's 'endless negotiations with the door-keeper'. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* [1995] translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 54-7.



ethical responsibility to a political questioning and critique?<sup>59</sup> Given that Levinas was supposed to introduce a 'wholly other' concept of ethics into Derrida's work, this question looks like a very traditional problematic.

The concerns of philosophers such as Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, both influenced by deconstruction, are misread. Critchley asserts that: 'Only a philosopher could declare the impossibility of politics.' But again, the key issue is that of philosophy as a discipline which justifies its language and takes care over its terms, even to the point of troubling the determination of the term, 'politics'. The problem is whether any politics can be presented at the level of philosophy by justifying its language without slipping into opinion or assertion artificially, or artfully, raised to the level of metaphysics. What procedures distinguish mere opinion expressed from political philosophy? It cannot be because these comments are uttered by someone deemed to be a 'philosopher'.

To see Derrida as offering a competing ethico-political *theory* is to misunderstand what is at stake in the attempt to escape the logic of logocentrism. The idea that justice marks a 'moral orientation' but that there is no rational procedure for legitimating and testing decisions and judgments in Levinas and Derrida, is a framing idea that owes its pertinence to that concept of determining logos challenged by both Levinas and Derrida<sup>60</sup>.

Critchley writes: 'I would claim that for Derrida there is also only one source of moral orientation, namely justice, and there are an enormous number of aporias one has to confront when thinking of the relation of justice to its concrete determination in law.' [EoD 275] From my reading of 'Force of Law' above, we can see that to refer to a *unique, singular source of justice* is simply unwarranted for Derrida.

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<sup>59</sup> 'The rigorous undecidability of deconstructive reading fails to account for the activity of political judgment, political critique, and the political decision.' [EoD 190]

<sup>60</sup> 'Let us assume, *concesso non dato*, that there is no assured passage, following the order of a foundation, according to a hierarchy of founding and founded ... between and ethics or a first philosophy of hospitality ... and a law or politics of hospitality .... Let us assume that one cannot *deduce* from Levinas's ethical discourse on hospitality a law and a politics, some particular law or politics in some determined situation today.' [Adieu 20]



### Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to insist on a plurality of writing styles as appropriate to the determinate text and context that cannot simply be understood as descriptive phenomenology<sup>61</sup>. In contrast, the reading offered by Critchley in his more recent work is suspect. He argues that Derrida's 'performative experiments' have been left behind as Derrida has been concerned to conduct a *quasi-phenomenological* investigation of subjective life – in particular, the ethico-political life exemplified in decisions and responsibility. For the description of the manner in which the other both exceeds my cognitive powers and leaves a pre-cognitive trace in my experiential forms marks a point at which normative contents can be derived. In a radio broadcast in 1998<sup>62</sup>, he sees the task of philosophy as 'providing us ... with *reminders* of what we already know but continually pass over in our day-to-day life. Philosophy reminds us of what is passed over in what passes for common sense.' [*EoD* 283] Philosophy helps us with the achievement of everyday tasks, by understanding the moral grammar of everyday life and trying to teach that grammar.

However, grammatology, genealogy and speculative writing exceed 'the careful description and analysis of particular phenomena ... [with] their deeply aporetic or undecidable structures ... [and] micrological detail of everyday life'<sup>63</sup>.

Moreover, Derrida's formal structurings encapsulate a continuity with the concerns developed in the 1960s regarding language, being and history. A far richer possibility is being occluded by returning to what is familiar. For Derrida, one must think and write against 'hegemonic language in public space' especially when that language seeks to determine what would count in public: 'If there were a community, or even a communism of writing, it would above all be on condition that war be waged on those, the greatest number, the strongest and the

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<sup>61</sup> It is worth thinking about the failure of Husserl to achieve the ultimate move from descriptive to 'critical' phenomenology as outlined in *Cartesian Meditations* §63.

<sup>62</sup> Included as an appendix in the second edition of *The Ethics of Deconstruction*.

<sup>63</sup> Critchley 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism – Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal?', p. 32.



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weakest at the same time, who forge and appropriate for themselves the dominant usages of language ...' [*PoF* 71] And such a 'war' need not be conducted in the game of thesis exchange.

To conclude, let us emphasise that by attending to the variety of forms of writing utilised by Derrida we have demonstrated thematic differences between him and Levinas. These differences are structured around fundamental disputes over the ontological constitution of language and history, which then translate into differences of political philosophy. We have stressed how this dispute additionally revolves around an understanding of what constitutes philosophical presentation. The possibility of simply gainsaying Levinas would in many cases breach this principle and reduce writing to the presentation of dogmatic opinion, hence the attention to the "formal" dimension in Derrida's presentations.

Yet even when this gainsaying is explicit, it appears to be ignored:

'Those who think that responsibility or the sense of responsibility is a good thing, a prime virtue, indeed the Good itself, are convinced however that one must always answer (for oneself, to the other, before the other, or before the law) and that, moreover, a nonresponse is always a modality determined in the space by unavoidable responsibility.' [*Passions* 17]

In contrast, Derrida emphasises that:

1. one always has the right not to respond;
2. if one does not have an answer, offering one amounts to a lack of respect;
3. a certain *nonresponse* can 'attest to politeness' or conversely, 'polite silence can become the most insolent weapon and most deadly irony.'  
[ibid.]
4. 'Is there a worse violence than the demand to give an account of everything?' [*Passions* 25]



## Conclusion

From a certain perspective, this thesis has pursued a narrow course. It has sought to refute, or at least radically circumscribe, a general consensus about the relation between Levinas and Derrida. At times its work has been mainly philological, convinced of the need to systematically reconstruct the claims of the key texts of both authors. What I believe to have been revealed thereby is not simply that Derrida is not Levinasian, and Levinas not Derridean, but that the two have conceptions of philosophy and its task that are distinct in every regard at a fundamental 'metaphysical' level. Owing to these different approaches, any apparent homology in discussion of the 'other' is superficial at best.

In treating the claim to 'influence', mutual or otherwise, seriously, as a philosophical claim, this thesis has rejected any claim that would rest *solely* on index or citation counting or on any use of similar terminology, such as 'trace' by the two authors. Following Skinner's first requirement, I have demonstrated that the 'characteristic form' of the two authors *shares no 'general similarity'*. In this way, Derrida does not inherit any concepts from Levinas and there is no basis for arguing, *pace* Critchley, that Derrida's deconstruction is 'ethical' if it is understood in Levinas's use of the term. Similarly, any suggestion that the 'later' Derrida undergoes an 'ethico-political turn' due to the influence of Levinas has three severe drawbacks.

1. Proponents of such a thesis have yet to demonstrate the manner in which Derrida's commitment to a philosophy of 'originary finitude' has been rejected or altered; nor does the central Levinasian theme of the infinite appear. In fact, Derrida's continual insistence on the primacy of the law in its contradictions and a genealogical propaedeutic contrasts with Levinas's *diagnosis* of the limitations of being.
2. The main themes ascribed to this later stage of Derrida's output, such as responsibility, undecidability, event and urgency were already formulated in the first works on Husserl.



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3. The later writings can be seen to maintain a relation to the earlier development of deconstruction and grammatology through formal and structural devices. In general, Derrida's practice of citation has been read in a manner which avoids the main theoretical problems involved in understanding it.

In this regard, Derrida's repeated and consistent criticisms of Levinas with respect to language, being and the 'otherness' of the Other can be given full weight, as can the rejection of any developmental model that depends on a 'break' or 'turn'. Any reference to 'influence' can only be maintained at the loosest level: for example, that Levinas 'prompted' Derrida to attend to certain questions or, and this is more important, that in a certain socio-historical conjuncture it becomes important to write again on and about Levinas. To reiterate, the nature of the latter two claims are of a different order to those dealt with in this thesis.

Despite this narrow focus on the question of influence, several other conclusions with wider import have been produced. My claim has been that the misguided ascription of influence follows from the distortion of both figures in the English-language reception. In particular, a difficult and strange theoretical terrain has been abridged through privileging received assumptions or expectations about the form and content of Levinas's philosophy – this is chiefly to be located in the received understanding of ethics and its relation to an equally received notion of politics, but could be seen to extend to an occlusion of the problems of practical philosophy in favour of *description*. More generally, an idealized image of academic philosophy as a Platonic symposium has effaced crucial theoretical problematics.

Perhaps the most ambitious aspect of this thesis is the two new readings of Levinas offered. The chapters in which *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* are reconstructed with reference to their philosophical systematicity are justified solely through the philological labour that produced them and the weight and consistency of citation in their presentation. Pointedly, given the framing discussion of influence, it argues that the neglected influences on



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Levinas are Franz Rosenzweig, Hermann Cohen and to a lesser degree Jean-Paul Sartre (although the influence of the later has been recognised, it has not been extended in the manner I suggest). Here the characteristic form of Levinas's theorization of the face, the infinite, time and being depends, and is only explained with reference to, a metaphysical, Neo-Kantian supplement to phenomenological methodology. The attempts to isolate a notion of the other (or Other) from this metaphysics (or religion) can no longer be understood to be Levinasian and are, in fact, the anticipated object of Levinas's own criticisms of 'contemplation' and 'recognition' (though I have yet to find an advocate for penitential glory in spite of a general championing of "Levinasian ethics"). Despite the move to proximity and hostage of *Otherwise than Being*, and the move from apology to nazirate, this metaphysical structuring remains in place.

Two more general questions relating to Levinas have been thrown up by this work. First, in what sense can Levinas be understood to be doing phenomenology? It more and more seems to me that Levinas takes up certain phenomenological results and reinterprets them or stitches them together in a systematic fashion. As noted by Derrida, the disregard for transcendentality, sense-explication and the primacy of the theoretical perhaps renders these results into quasi-empirical 'facts' and puts in question the universality of its claims. Is it simply a systematic confession of worldview?

Second, and this follows from the first, what is the philosophical status of Levinas's writing? There appears to be an absence of concern for the generation of warrant with respect to the constructions and assertions. What enables Levinas to espy or postulate the Beyond Being? The testimony of the religious tradition? Plotinus and Descartes? Or should we see Levinas as a Rortyan 'strong poet' beyond the myth of rational presentation? A Counter-Nietzsche as well as a Counter-Hobbes?

One final point regarding Levinas: the fulcrum of Levinas's philosophy is the claim to the excellence of the West as evinced by the connected notions of the infinite and the other. The geo-political writings and asides with reference to Asian philosophy are not merely incidental or biographical ephemera. Coupled



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to the second point above, I have reservations with respect to any project that would attempt to find in Levinas resources for a multiculturalist project. Nor can Levinas help to reanimate the 'human' in the 'humanities': the structure of 'what binds us morally' can find in Levinas only a representation of a specific religious tradition<sup>1</sup>.

The presentation of Derrida is less ambitious, or, at least, more consistent with contemporary reception. However, part of my resistance to the model of the 'ethico-political turn' is based on a resistance to a precipitous, or premature, rush to thematic paraphrase cashed out in terms of constative declarations of position. Common to both 'analytic' and 'continental' philosophy is the idea that philosophical presentation is exclusively the statement of what an individual holds to be true.

'I am not sure ... that taking a position [in philosophy], at least as a show of force or as a force of rupture with the norms of traditional philosophical discourse, is essential to every materialism, to materialism as such. Are we agreed that there is no *effective* and *efficient* position, no veritable force of rupture, without a minute, rigorous, extended analysis, an analysis that is differentiated and as scientific as possible? Analysis of the greatest number of givens, and of the most diverse givens (general economy)? And that it is necessary to uproot this notion of taking a position from every determination that, in the last analysis, remains psychologicistic, subjectivistic, moral and voluntaristic?''<sup>2</sup>

What distinguishes Derridean deconstruction and grammatology is a writing on more than one level; a writing that requires attention to these problems of performativity; historical conjuncture and urgency; warranted assertibility; responsibility for all conceptual resources (*Selbstbesinnung*); not to mention the dimension cursorily opened in Appendix B: grammatology as a form of anthropology. It is this variety of levels that my different chapters have tried to encapsulate while insisting on the underlying, 'theoretical' valency that persists under the aegis of the Greek decision to treat philosophy as science.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare: Judith Butler 'Precarious Life' in *Precarious Life: The Powers of mourning and violence* (London & New York, Verso, 2004), pp. 128-151.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida with Jean-Louis Houdebine & Guy Scarpetta 'Positions' in Jacques Derrida *Positions* [1972] translated and annotated by Alan Bass 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London & New York, Continuum, 2004), pp. 35-78; p.76.



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It is this perhaps excessive commitment to the theoretical that is condemned by Levinas as it animates "structuralism". What has been absent from this thesis for reasons of space is an attempt at evaluation of this suggestion to take grammarology *qua* the *science* of writing seriously. This would involve an appreciation of Derrida's writing on the university, the media and the public sphere more generally, in its structuring by nonphilosophical as well as philosophical forces and the testing of this theoretical endeavour beyond philological reconstruction.

Although this thesis has been content to demonstrate the disjunction between Derrida and Levinas with respect to speculation, anticipation and futurity, the strain of this imposed limitation is evident in Chapter Three where the philological summary is not opened up to a critical, philosophical treatment of the various claims regarding "history" and epochality. We could query how a 'strategy *sans finalité*' avoids unwarranted assertion. How does the *clôture* of an epochal understanding of history in terms of origin, meaning and telos, relate to the later writing on history and temporality of *Specters of Marx*, where Fukuyama's notion of the end of history is rebutted?

The necessary precondition for assessing these speculative claims is the presentation of the centrality and persistence of such claims in Derrida's endeavour and the distinguishing of them from Levinas's strategic imposition of an idea upon being, whose meaningfulness depends upon an infinite time produced by fecundity and the family. Both authors have a speculative dimension but it has to date been mollified by the dominant, tacit understandings of philosophy and philosophical presentation in contemporary English-language philosophy.

This is most evident in the collapse of the notion of *l'Autrui*, and transcendence, into an *acknowledgement* of the humanity of the other. Can Levinas really be the 'hidden king' of twentieth century of French philosophy if he can be so conveniently assimilated into a *mélange* of bad phenomenology, late Wittgenstein, and Cavell? The 'shrewd pates' have mollified precisely what is



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mournful from Levinas (In the sense attributed by Nietzsche to Diogenes: what use is a philosopher who does not make one mourn?).

Is there not a Levinasian irony here? The “master” is domesticated: no longer the one who brings our tradition more than it contains, but the one who shores up our parochial hypostasis, our excrescence. There really would be no need to insist on any specificity to “continental” or “European” philosophy since we would already have what it could bring us.



## Appendix A

### Husserl and The Crisis of European Humanity

Our concern to situate Levinas within a certain neo-Kantian context, should not occlude the relationship to Husserl, whose later work Adorno describes as a return to 'a subtly modified neo-Kantianism'<sup>1</sup>. We find in Levinas's 'Meaning and Sense' a reference to Husserl's writings from the 1930s. Championing a philosophical culture, which arose in Greece and understands 'the infantile character of historical cultures', Levinas remarks that:

'Platonism, as an affirmation of the human independently of culture and history, is found also in Husserl, in the obstinacy with which he postulated the phenomenological reduction and the constitution ... of the cultural world in the transcendental and intuitive consciousness. We are not obliged to follow him down the way he took to rejoin this Platonism, and we think we have found the straightforwardness of meaning by another method. That intelligible manifestation is produced in the straightforwardness of morality ...' [MS 58-9].

Instead of locating the idea of the infinite and its realisation in the objective practice of sciences, Levinas situates it in the face. But the goal is the same, offering humanity as a whole an orientation of existence, such that barbarism is evaded by reconnecting philosophy to everyday life.

Though it is true that Husserl does pay more attention to this 'Platonist' element of his work after 1930, the themes associated are already present in his 1911 essay, 'Philosophy as Rigorous Science'<sup>2</sup>. In opposition to the historicism of Dilthey, phenomenology is presented as the foundation of philosophy of spirit that would overcome the anarchy of *Weltanschauungen*. Valorising the latter as self-sufficient, concrete expressions of historical life, Dilthey's historicism destroys belief in 'progress' and universal validity [PRS 123 ff.]. But, for

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique* [1956] translated by Willis Domingo (Oxford, Blackwell, 1982), p. 2. Rose has argued that even the *Logical Investigations* should be understood as a 'reformulation' of Marburg neo-Kantianism (*Hegel contra Sociology* pp. 23-24).

<sup>2</sup> 'Philosophy as Rigorous Science' [1911] translated by Quentin Lauer in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy* (New York, Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 71-147. Hereafter abbreviated to PRS followed by page reference.



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Husserl, this underplays the very principles which enable the empirical research conducted by Dilthey.

Husserl extracts the strong idea of science from the study of ‘the subjective immanence of *Weltanschauung*’ by discovering the common spirit throughout this history and historical constructions; this idea is supragenerational and oriented by goals the value of which can give a *sense to life in general* [PRS 135]. The aim of science gives an ethical ideal of human development by projecting the practical unifiability of *Weltanschauung* and science into a teleology with a unified future that is worked towards: science approaches eternal goals ‘asymptotically’ *in the infinite* [PRS 136-37].

This essay, presaging the works from the *Crisis*-period<sup>3</sup>, rejects the understanding of history as an ‘unending concatenation of illusory progress’ [Crisis 7] which leads to a spiritual malaise, nihilism (exacerbated with the rise of European Fascism and Nazism).

‘But can the world, and human existence in it, truthfully have meaning if the sciences recognize as true only what is objectively established in this fashion, and if history has nothing more to teach us than that all the shapes of the spiritual world, all the conditions of life, ideals, norms upon which man relies, form and dissolve themselves like fleeting waves, that it always was and ever will be so, that again and again reason must turn into nonsense, and well-being into misery?’ [Crisis 6-7]

Identified as a specifically European phenomenon as early as 1923 in his articles for the Japanese publication *Kaizo*<sup>4</sup>, this malaise is explicit in the title of his 1935 lecture in Vienna: ‘Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity’<sup>5</sup>. Phenomenology is tasked with averting this nihilism – Husserl understands the

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<sup>3</sup> Collected in Edmund Husserl *Husserliana Band VI: Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendente Phänomenologie* edited by Walter Biemel (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1954). Hereafter abbreviated to *Krisis* followed by page reference.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Fünf Aufsätze über Erneuerung’ in *Husserliana Band XXVII: Aufsätze und Vorträge* edited by Thomas Nenon and Hans Rainer Sepp (Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), pp. 3-93.

<sup>5</sup> ‘The Vienna Lecture’ [1935] in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* translated by David Carr (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp. 269-299. Hereafter abbreviated to *Vienna* followed by page reference.



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role of phenomenology as the uncovering of what is unconditionally universal in the spiritual order, a universality we ‘obtain’:

‘... not through the critique of some present or handed-down system, of some scientific or prescientific “*Weltanschauung*” (which might as well be Chinese, in the end), but only through a critical understanding of the total unity of history – *our* history. For it has spiritual unity through the unity and driving force of the task which, in the historical process ... seeks to move through the various stages of obscurity toward satisfying clarity until it finally works its way through to perfect insight.’ [*Crisis* 71]

Moreover, transcendental phenomenology demonstrates that this ‘extraordinary teleology’ is ‘*innate only in our Europe*’ thereby overcoming this sickness by illustrating the essential core of the idea of Europe<sup>6</sup>: ‘In this way a character is given to persons, associations of persons, and all their cultural accomplishments which binds them all together.’ [*Vienna* 273-74]

*Already tacitly animating European history* this idea forms a culture produced by the repeated irruption of the idea of the infinite (Greeks, Galileo, etc.). This paradoxical historicity of truth, noted by Derrida, sees scientific idealities, omnitemporal validities, produced in history by a generation upon generation of scientists<sup>7</sup> instantiating the theoretical attitude: ‘... community of scientists as a community of knowledge living in the unity of a common responsibility’ [*Ursprung* 165]. This is the ‘profoundest and purest tradition’ for Husserl, the sense of which must be explicitly taken up and generalized as *sense* qua orientation. Crucially, such a task is a task for humanity as a whole in communal activity and co-responsibility – it is fundamentally co-operative in its intersubjective structure<sup>8</sup>.

Europe was born from ideas of reason, from which the modern world finds itself alienated into ‘barbarity’, an ‘annihilating conflagration of disbelief’ [*Vienna*

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<sup>6</sup> In *The Other Heading*, Derrida observes that ‘national hegemony always presents itself as a philosopheme’. *The Other Heading* p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> ‘... every science is related to an open chain of generations of those who work for and with one another, researchers either known or unknown to one another who are the accomplishing subjectivity of the whole living science.’ [*Ursprung* 159]

<sup>8</sup> Derrida: ‘Egological subjectivity cannot be responsible for this development, which is continually totalized in an absolute Present. Only a communal subjectivity can produce the historical system of truth and be wholly responsible for it.’ [*Origin* 60]



299]. Phenomenology aims to reanimate a ‘heroism’ of Europe through faith in its historical teleology. Once this self-image is secure, a new human epoch can emerge self-consciously embracing the ‘free shaping of its existence, its historical life through ideas of reason, through infinite tasks’ [Vienna 274]. Europe capitalizes on the doubled meaning of sense (*Sinn, sens*) – *phenomenological* sense and *teleological* sense – orientation and meaning. For late Husserl, ideality, or rather idealization *qua* infinitization (as indefinite linear extension), produces a new historicity and history instantiated in *philosophy as a new cultural form*: ‘one which, living in finitude, lives toward poles of infinity’ [Vienna 277]<sup>9</sup>.

It aims at infinitely distant, normative shape in anticipation, but this presentiment is not without warrant according to Husserl, it is based on and already orients our historical development: ‘Now all of this is not intended as a speculative interpretation of our historicity but as the expression of a vital anticipation which arises through unprejudiced reflection.’ [Vienna 275] [translation modified] That is, there is a ‘first step’ in which infinity is discovered: the natural sciences and the linear extension of mathematics. This infinity is then attenuated (this is its novelty) to aim at ‘a great and distant human future’ – this ‘phoenix of life-inwardness aims at immortality’ [Vienna 299]<sup>10</sup>.

‘What is new, unprecedented, is the conceiving of this idea of a rational infinite totality of being with a rational science systematically mastering it. An infinite world, here a world of idealities, is conceived, not as one whose objects become accessible to our knowledge singly, imperfectly, and as it were accidentally, but as one which is attained by rational, systematically coherent method.’ [Crisis 22]

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<sup>9</sup> For Husserl, this logos is inseparable from monotheism. ‘In the concept of God the singular is essential. Proper to it, from the human standpoint, is that fact that God’s ontic validity and his value-validity are experienced as an absolute internal bond. The next step here is the coalescence of this absoluteness with that of philosophical ideality. In the general process of idealization, which proceeds from philosophy, God is logicized [and] becomes the bearer of the absolute logos.’ [Vienna 288]

<sup>10</sup> Derrida: ‘Whenever a *telos* or teleology comes to orient, order, and make possible a historicity, it annuls that historicity by the same token and neutralizes the unforeseeable and incalculable irruption, the singular and exceptional alterity of *what* comes, or indeed of *who* comes, that without which, or the one without whom, nothing happens or arrives.’ [Rogues 128]



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As in ‘Philosophy as a Rigorous Science’, philosophy ‘teaches us how to carry on the eternal work of humanity’ [*PRS* 73], where spirit alone is immortal and science, underpinned by transcendental phenomenology, is the only cultural form to be a ‘culture of ideas’, to set itself infinite tasks, ‘capable of an absolute self-responsibility on the basis of absolute theoretical insights’ [*Vienna* 283]. This task is reason itself – the struggle for truth [*Crisis* 13] – *rational through seeking to be rational* [*Crisis* 341]<sup>11</sup>.

In this way, phenomenology establishes a ‘modern European humanity’ [*Crisis* 12], through which it exercises ‘its function as one which is archontic for humanity as a whole.’ [*Vienna* 289] This function is not bound to ‘the soil of national tradition’, but ‘aliens’ only participate in it by first coming to understand it. In the ‘Vienna Lecture’, this idea is expressed as follows:

‘Historical mankind does not always divide itself up in the same way in accord with [the category of historicity]. We feel this precisely in our own Europe. There is something unique here that is recognized in us by all other human groups, too, something that, quite apart from all considerations of utility, becomes a motive for them to Europeanize themselves even in their unbroken will to spiritual self-preservation; whereas we, *if we understand ourselves properly*, would never Indianize ourselves, for example. I mean that we feel (and in spite of all obscurity this feeling is probably legitimate) that *an entelechy is inborn in our European civilization which holds sway throughout all changing shapes of Europe and accords to them the sense of a development toward an ideal shape of life and being as an eternal pole*. ... The spiritual *telos* of European humanity, in which the particular *telos* of particular nations and of individual men is contained, *lies in the infinite, is an infinite idea* toward which, in concealment, the whole spiritual becoming aims, so to speak. As soon as it becomes consciously recognized in the development as *telos*, it necessarily also becomes practical as a goal of the will; and thereby a new, higher stage of development is introduced which is under the guidance of norms, normative ideas.’ [*Vienna* 275] [*my italics*]

Transcendental phenomenology brings ‘proper self-understanding’ to Europe; it brings this ‘entelechy’ to the fore such that the higher stage of humanity is instigated as soon as a ‘practical goal of the will’ is assumed. These sentiments are repeated in *The Crisis of European Sciences*, but the productive realization of

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<sup>11</sup> ‘The faith in the possibility of philosophy as a task, that is, in the possibility of universal knowledge, is something we *cannot* let go. We *know* that we are *called* to this task as serious philosophers.’ [*Crisis* 17] Derrida here identifies the Kantian ‘interest of reason’: science wants to be unconditional truth [*Rogues* 132].



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such normativity is positioned in slightly different terms recognising the possible *illegitimacy* of this feeling of ‘inborn entelechy’.

‘To bring latent reason to the understanding of its own possibilities and thus to bring insight to the possibility of metaphysics as a true possibility – this is the only way to put metaphysics or **universal** philosophy [*universale Philosophie*] on the strenuous road to realization. It is the only way to decide whether the *telos* which was inborn in European humanity at the birth of Greek philosophy – that of humanity which seeks to exist, and is only possible, through philosophical reason [*ein Menschentum aus philosophischer Vernunft sein zu wollen und nur als solche sein zu können*], moving endlessly from latent to manifest reason and forever seeking its own norms through this ... whether this *telos*, then, is merely a factual, historical **delusion**, the accidental acquisition of one accidental humanity [*ein zufälliger Erwerb einer zufälligen Menschheit*], of merely one among many other humanities [*Menschheiten*] and historicities [*Geschichtlichkeiten*], or whether Greek humanity was not rather the first breakthrough to what is essential to humanity as such, its *entelechy*. Humankind in general is essentially [basic] human being in generatively and socially tied humanities, and the human is a reasoning being only insofar as the whole of their humanity is a humanity [governed or directed by] reason [*Menschentum überhaupt ist wesensmäßig Menschsein in generativ und sozial verbunden Menschheiten, und ist der Mensch Vernunftwesen* (animal rationale), *so ist er es nur, sofern seine ganze Menschheit Vernunftmenschheit ist*]. ... Philosophy and science would accordingly be the historical movement of the revelation of universal reason, “innate” in humankind as such.’ [*Crisis* 15-16 translation modified, *Krisis* 13-14] [Husserl’s italics, my emphasis in bold]

I have emphasised the setting up of the opposition between a *universal* philosophy and a *delusion*. It is presented in stark terms – either one or the other – that is the demand placed on the claims of European reason, to demonstrate the universality of its claims through their *accomplishment*: ‘Together with the new task and its universal apodictic ground, the *practical* possibility of a new philosophy will prove itself: *through its execution*. But it will also become apparent that all the philosophy of the past, though unbeknownst to itself, was inwardly oriented toward this new sense of philosophy.’ [*Crisis* 18, my emphasis]<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> It is this ultimate element of ‘bootstrapping’, proving itself *through its execution*, that connects Cohen, Levinas and Husserl.



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In the aspiration to *absolute ideas*, Europe is distinguished, from the ‘merely empirical anthropological types’ of China and India [*Crisis* 16]<sup>13</sup>, which though sharing superficial common features are distinguished by ‘essential differences of principle’: they have a *thoroughly different orientation* [*Vienna* 279-80]<sup>14</sup>. For example, Husserl refers to a determinate Indian *historicity* [*die indische Geschichtlichkeit*] distinct from that felt by Europeans [*Vienna* 274]. Although, Husserl’s essay on the origin of geometry attempts to demonstrate that the ‘same reason functions in every man ... no matter how primitive he is’ [*Origin* 180] (and does so by appealing to a general *Einfühlung*), cultural particularities that are developed over history on top of that basic formation are such that they gain autonomy<sup>15</sup>.

Is this problem not to the fore in the discussion of the *Geschichtlosigkeit* of ‘archaic’, or ‘primitive’ societies? ‘Stagnant’ and ‘locked into their own horizons’, their comparison with Europe seems to unsettle the notion of a transcendental historical a priori. If the *idea of infinite task and tradition has not yet irrupted in them*, this would suggest that their transcendental historicity is distinct. Even if sociality and culture belong to all humanity, thereby indicating a *general base-level historicity*, these ‘empirical types’ are differentiated *at a lower level* by Husserl.

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<sup>13</sup> As Derrida asks in his dissertation, ‘... how can one distinguish rigorously between the empirical types of human groups and the transcendental types?’ *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl’s Philosophy* p. 157.

<sup>14</sup> ‘But within their own framework of meaning this world-view and world-knowledge are and remain mythical and practical, and it is a mistake, a falsification of their sense, for those raised in the scientific ways of thinking created in Greece and developed in the modern period to speak of Indian and Chinese philosophy and science (astronomy, mathematics), i.e., to interpret India, Babylonia, and China, in a European way.’ [*Vienna* 284-5]

<sup>15</sup> Here, we might see the covert reference made by Levinas with reference to Durkheim and “levels of being” cited in Chapter One. See also, Husserl’s own correspondence with Lévy-Bruhl from 1935, which is precisely concerned with the relation of the various humanities [*Menschheiten*] with their particular *Umwelt*, logics and ontologies. There is also reference to supernational formations [*Übernation*] – such as Europe, and, again, China. Husserl *Briefwechsel: Band VII*, pp. 159-65 (especially pp. 161-163).



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To explicate the possible plurality of historicities, Derrida references the three-stage model outlined in the fragment, 'Stufen der Geschichtlichkeit. Erste Geschichtlichkeit'<sup>16</sup>

1. Basic socialisation as the most general historicity of human existence.
2. European culture, the theoretical project (philosophy).
3. The "conversion of philosophy into [transcendental] *phenomenology*".

Europe is not simply a good example, as on Derrida's reading, which *awakens* a latent potential in stage 1. Its creation of the theoretical attitude brings a new form of historicity, distinct in its own right. Phenomenology brings that historicity *to the fore* and makes of it *a willed, common project*. This is quite distinct from Derrida's deflationary account of each stage as a 'sense-investigation of a hidden intention' [*la prise de la conscience d'une intention cachée*] [*Origin* 115-16, *OG* 121-22]. Indeed, it is important that Europe, in modernity, does not realise, in full awareness, its distinctiveness and can valorise the idea of cultural relativism, and as such is in need of phenomenology for its full *Selbstbesinnung*. Only phenomenology would be such an explicit coming-to-consciousness; without its explicit infinitization, no *standard could be invoked to decide between the value of different projects*<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> 'Stufen der Geschichtlichkeit. Erste Geschichtlichkeit' [1934] Beilage XXVI in *Krisis* [*Krisis* 502-3]. Cited by Derrida [*Origin* 115-16].

<sup>17</sup> Phenomenology tends to position such teleologies on scale that includes animality on the basis of cognitive ability. We find the following consequences. The question of primitive or underdeveloped humanity is projected onto this spectrum, so that developed humanity is differentiated from underdeveloped humanity where the latter lies closer to animality. Thus Husserl in the *Crisis* can write: 'Just as man and even the Papuan represent a new stage of animal nature, i.e. as opposed to the beast, so philosophical reason represents a new stage of human nature and its reason.' The Papuan is an advance on the animal but the philosophising human is an advance on the Papuan – on the same scale: thought distinguishes humans from animality; philosophical thought distinguishes certain humans from others. Europe is then the site where humanity has achieved, and can extend, its apogee. Philosophical thought is valorised as a distinct stage of human possibility against which everything else is abnormal or deficient. In the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl writes: 'Among the problems of abnormality the problem of non-human animality and that of the levels of "higher and lower" animals [*Tierheit* - animality] are included. Relative to the animal [*Tier*], man is, constitutionally speaking, the normal case – just as I myself am the primal norm constitutionally for all other men [*wie ich selbst konstitutiv für alle Menschen*]. Animals are essentially constituted for me as abnormal "variants" of my humanness, even though *among* them in turn normality and abnormality may be differentiated.' [*CM* 126] [translation altered] This combination of the categories of animality and abnormality, where I, as philosophising (European) subject, am the normal, advanced case, drives a logic of Eurocentrism which is hard-pressed to avoid racism. Derrida has noted that Husserl is forced by his own logic to include the colonies as spiritually part of Europe, while excluding the gypsies



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The phenomenological attitude which takes responsibility for this active valuation is '*comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion*' [*Crisis* 137]. It foregrounds the teleological function of human: the 'ought-to-be' of reason 'that alone makes humanity blessed' [*Crisis* 400]. The value of this specific theoretical attitude lies in the projected fifth part of the *Krisis*: the possibility of humanity taking responsibility for itself, for which phenomenology, as the culmination of theory and philosophy, is suited<sup>18</sup>.

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who traverse its internal boundaries. Racism might then be not a deficiency that can be isolated from phenomenology, but is produced from its constitutive allergy to animality and *psychologism*. Derrida *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*: translated by Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby (Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 120-122 n. 1.

<sup>18</sup> See Appendix X to the *Crisis* (pp. 397-400): 'Fink's Outline for the Continuation of the Crisis'.



## Appendix B

### Grammatology

‘The anxiously hovering, Brownian motion-like movement of the argument Derrida is mounting puts out filaments, stems and extensions, which gradually and over time put out discursive space through semi-repetition and occupy it. ... It is as if Derrida throws back ropes to his own work, while allowing the future to come back to us not as a set of calculated compossibles, but as a force proceeding back to us from strands that have been projected out. For such a mode of composition, the phrase is like a point of accumulation in its context, it acquires weight and effect in a way which is not in simple posterity to the situation it is in.’

Marian Hobson *Opening Lines* [OL 193]

A constitutive ‘hesitation’ in Derrida’s writing attempts formally to foreground Derrida’s own problematic in its concern for language and its determination of philosophy at a meta-level. In this regard, one can understand the motivation comparing Derrida and Wittgenstein’s interest in showing the limits of language and philosophy<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, this hesitation is perhaps exacerbated in the refusal to consider that limit as natural or transcendently determined.

‘Perhaps patient meditation and painstaking investigation on and around what is still provisionally called writing, far from falling short of a science of writing or of hastily dismissing it by some obscurantist reaction, letting it rather develop its positivity as far as possible, are the wanderings of a way of thinking that is faithful and attentive to the ineluctable world of the future which proclaims itself at present, beyond the closure of knowledge.’  
[*Gramm* 4]

Attending to that future in anticipatory closure of knowledge marks a going-beyond-the-limit without guarantee of that exorbitance being recuperated meaningfully.

If classical philosophy’s attempt to master language’s equivocality through technical devices is undecidable, and empiricism revels in an unavoidable fall or finitude, Derrida insists that this techno-theological legacy ‘... must be abandoned in order to think the originary appurtenance of desire to discourse, of discourse to the history of the world, and the already-there-ness of the language in which desire deludes itself.’ [*Gramm* 139] This abandoning cannot be

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<sup>1</sup> See Henry Staten *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1985).



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achieved in one blow; any appurtenance is not simply thought but coaxed or precipitated in the subsequent consumption and circulation of these writings in their hesitations and detours<sup>2</sup>. 'To recognise writing in speech, that is to say difference and the absence of speech is to begin to think the lure [*bricole*].' [Gramm 139] This *lure* or trap generates material that connects grammatology to a form of semiology liberated from the dominance of a linguistics presenting itself as a model for human sciences [Gramm 28]<sup>3</sup>.

This would seem to open up a further dimension to Derrida's writing in which it comes close to a new *empirical* form of human science that attends to the materiality of language and the sign. That is, the critique of a triumphalist scientism, exemplified by the linguistic turn, does not remain simply dogmatic – made from a transcendental or phenomenological position. Insofar as the results of the work on Husserl remain not simply a negative demonstration, it is in the rethinking of the Saussurian sign that this is best seen. The critique of intuition as grounding evidence provides the resources for expanding the notion of the sign, so that the differential (*différential*) structure of the (conceptual) signified is now not qualitatively distinguishable from the differential (*différential*) structure of the signifier. The materiality of this structure of the sign can no longer be nailed down by an animating intention such that equivocality is evaded<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Compare the passages on Joyce and Hegel in the 'Introduction to the Origin of Geometry' [Origin 100 ff.].

<sup>3</sup> Grammatology opposes itself to linguistics insofar as the latter adopts a naïve psychology to determine the limit of its object of study: '... the semiological project ... in spite of its greater theoretical extension, remained *governed* by linguistics, organized as if linguistics were at once its center and its telos. *Even though semiology was in fact more general and more comprehensive than linguistics, it continued to be regulated as if it were one of the areas of linguistics. The linguistic sign remained exemplary for semiology*, it dominated it as the master-sign and the generative model: the pattern.' [Gramm 51] The explicit reference to Barthes in *Of Grammatology* serves as a correction – Barthes did not recognise that semiology (equivalent to Peirce's rhetoric) is more general than linguistics and allowed the latter's metaphysical interpretation of the sign to dominate its own project [Gramm 52].

<sup>4</sup> Writing is then not to be 'decoded' for a reference to a signified and thereby a reference. When Derrida asserts that, 'There is nothing outside of the text' [*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*], he is insisting that the text is not a signifier pointing towards a single, given signified which would determine the *Nachleben* of that signifier. The text cannot refer to some one thing. Nor should it be understood at the level of the *referent*: whether for reality or the author's intention. His infamous phrase is directed at the 'tranquil confidence that leaps from text to its presumed content'. Marrati notes that the 'sense of a text is never unveiled by a hermeneutic that takes the infinite as the temporal horizon of its task' (*Gensis and Trace* p. xiii).



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It is important to realise that this marks the connection between *Speech and Phenomena* and *Of Grammatology*. The deconstruction of Husserl's distinction between meaningful expression and indication results in the generalization of indication: 'We now know in fact that, for the order of signification in general, the whole of psychic experience (under the surface character of its *acts* – even when they intend idealities and objective necessities) contains only indicative concatenations' [SP 29-30] – 'the totality of speech is caught up in an indicative web' [SP 31].

To think, then, 'the originary appurtenance of desire to discourse' requires techniques to think the originary nature of indicative *association* from which, contra Husserl, science cannot inure itself<sup>5</sup>. It is the ineliminable precondition for meaningful expression: the 'already-there-ness' of language is central to this *materiality* of the signifier<sup>6</sup>.

Grammatology, as a 'speculativa grammatica', is this displacement of linguistics, now necessarily subordinate to generalized semiology of *association*. It investigates the 'formal doctrine of conditions which a discourse must satisfy in order to have sense'. There are three aspects to this research (taken from Peirce):

1. Pure Grammar;
2. Logic – the study of what may hold true of an object;
3. Rhetoric – the laws by which one sign gives birth to another – to wit, *association* [Gramm 48-49].

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. 'It is easy to see that even in [ordinary] human life, and first of all in every individual life from childhood up to maturity, the originally intuitive life which creates its originally self-evident structures through activities on the basis of sense-experience very quickly and in increasing measure falls victim to the *seduction of language*. Greater and greater segments of this life lapse into a kind of talking and reading that is dominated purely by association; and often enough, in respect to the validities arrived at in this way, it is disappointed by subsequent experience. ... [science] is obviously concerned from the start to put a stop to the free play of associative constructions.' [Ursprung 165] See also Husserl *Logical Investigations* 'Investigation 1' §4 'Digression on the Associative Origin of Indication' pp. 273-74.

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, there is no space here to discuss the path opened up to Lacan via this idea.



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This applies equally to philosophical writing<sup>7</sup>. The process of presentation is not simply a medium or vehicle for thought – the materiality of the signifier and syntactical apparatuses mean that ‘... we must not confound the meaning of the architecture with the declared intention of the work’ [*Gramm* 195]. In fact, one of the constitutive features of philosophy has been its efforts to effect precisely this break between signified and signifier. ‘Philosophy is, within writing, nothing but this movement of writing as effacement of the signifier and the desire of presence restored, of being, signified in its brilliance and its glory.’ [*Gramm* 286]<sup>8</sup>

‘... here one would have to mediate even more patiently the irreducible complicity, despite all of the philosopher’s rhetorical efforts, between everyday language and philosophical language; or, better, the complicity between certain historical languages and philosophical language. ... philosophical language belongs to a system of language(s). Thereby, its nonspeculative ancestry always brings a certain equivocality into speculation. ... Since this equivocality is original and irreducible, perhaps philosophy must adopt it, think it and be thought in it, must accommodate duplicity and difference within speculation, within the very purity of philosophical meaning. No one, it seems to us, has attempted this more profoundly than Hegel.’ [*VM* 141-142]

There are at least two separate dimensions to these considerations:

1. The written nature of philosophy means that it draws on a ‘set of tropic resources older than philosophy’: hence, the fundamental ‘ambiguity of the metaphysical text’<sup>9</sup>. Philosophy cannot ‘dominate’ these features, even if it can be defined as this constitutive ‘forgetting’ of metaphoricity<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> This is perhaps the best illustration of the intimate interweaving of phenomenology and ‘structuralism’ in Derrida’s deconstruction and grammatology. Indeed, one could suggest an *analytical* division between the two, such that deconstruction displaces the phenomenological function and grammatology the structural or ontological function.

<sup>8</sup> See also: ‘... [the philosophical text] although it is in fact always written, includes, precisely as its philosophical specificity, the project of effacing itself in the face of the signified content which it transports and in general teaches.’ [*Gramm* 160]

<sup>9</sup> Marrati *Genesis and Trace* p. 139. See also Jacques Derrida ‘Qual Quelle: Valéry’s Sources’ [1971] translated by Alan Bass in *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 273-306.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Philosophy would be this process of metaphorization which gets carried away in and of itself. Constitutionally, philosophical culture will always have been an obliterating one.’ Derrida ‘White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy’ [1971] translated by Alan Bass in *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 207-271; p. 211.



2. The separation of these 'tropic', formal or metaphorical resources from the philosophical content depends itself on a philosophical gesture which means that no other discourse or exterior position can dominate these features either. Metaphor itself is a philosophical concept. 'Each time that a rhetoric defines metaphor, not only is *a* philosophy implied, but also a conceptual network in which philosophy *itself* has been constituted. ... What is defined, therefore, is implied in the defining of the definition.'<sup>11</sup>

Thus philosophy understands itself to be grounded, or inscribed, in a nonphilosophical and rhetorical context of force. Rhetoric concerns the 'living circulation of discourse' which Derrida notes Hegel never investigated<sup>12</sup>. The potential rhetorico-associative effects of grammatology are simply absent from most discussion of Derrida's *writing*; as such it would bring the grammatologist close to a sort of semiologist or anthropologist, thereby infecting Derrida's texts with the question of whether they are designed to elicit 'first-rate ethnographic material' the better to continue its veiled transformation in response to closure. Wherein 'painstaking analysis' into writing might necessitate an ironic dissemblance of agenda, the better to observe those signs producing each other. The movement towards what is other to reason, the nonphilosophical text (chain of traces), can only occur from within this determining structure, this process, this economy.

### Resisting Mutation

'Emmanuel Levinas slowly displaced, slowly bent according to an inflexible and simple exigency, the axis, trajectory and even order of phenomenology or ontology .... Once again, he completely changed the landscape of thought; he did so, in a dignified way, without polemic, at once from within, faithfully, and from very far away, from the attestation of a completely other place. ... [This] is a discreet but irreversible mutation, one of those powerful, singular, and rare provocations. ... This happened, this mutation happened, *through him*, through Emmanuel Levinas, who was conscious of this immense responsibility in a way that was, I believe, at once clear, confident, calm and modest, like that of a prophet.' [Adieu 11-12]

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p. 230.

<sup>12</sup> *Dissemination* p. 36.



## Appendix B - Grammatology

In *Adieu*, Levinas's work is described as a 'mutation' and a 'provocation' that has awakened us to themes that have changed 'the course of philosophical reflection'<sup>13</sup>. What does it mean to describe the work of a philosopher as a mutation?

In this vocabulary of mutation there may be a veiled reference to Proust, who writes: 'For theories and schools, like microbes and globules, devour one another and, by their struggles, ensure life's continuance'<sup>14</sup>. Or might it point away from debates about the robustness of thematization in Levinas, towards a broader impact on 'the spirit of the age', the *Zeitgeist*? This marks a change of terrain. Levinas's status within the philosophical community and beyond has been transformed since the time of 'Violence and Metaphysics', where Derrida explicitly criticised Levinas' interpretation of Husserl and Heidegger and paid particular attention to the problems associated with a phenomenological treatment of the other qua wholly other. Importantly, there is no retraction of these criticisms in Derrida's later work.

In the absence of any homology of 'characteristic form', we are faced with the following conundrum: why does Derrida's writing on Levinas undergo such a shift after the publication of 'At this Very Moment...'? Our suggestion will be that it coincides both with a shift to a more grammatological writing and to the changed historical conditions regarding the reception of Levinas. Published in 1964, 'Violence and Metaphysics', is the first sustained philosophical engagement with Levinas's work. At the time of writing in the 1960s, Levinas was not widely read. Indeed many argue that Levinas benefited from a broadly sympathetic treatment by Derrida, who includes him among the 'community of those who question'. However, as has been pointed out by both Badiou<sup>15</sup> and

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<sup>13</sup> 'We already see innumerable signs ... in all the translations, courses, seminars, conferences, etc., that the reverberations of this thought will have changed the course of philosophical reflection in our time, and of our reflection *on* philosophy ...' [*Adieu* 4]

<sup>14</sup> Marcel Proust *Sodom and Gomorrah* [1921-22] translated by John Sturrock (London, Allen Lane, 2002), p. 216.

<sup>15</sup> Badiou *Ethics* pp. 18-25.



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Dominic Lecourt<sup>16</sup>, Levinas now occupies a quite different position (from quasi-theological peripheral thinker to ‘communal surety’) within the general dominance of an ethical discourse of the other<sup>17</sup>.

It seems pertinent here to raise the question of writing strategy. In *Positions*, Derrida insists that, ‘the incision of deconstruction is not a voluntary decision – it does not take place just anywhere- it can only be made according to lines of force’ [*Positions* 82]. Such an assessment may not be foregrounded, since to do so may discharge the force of its intervention in a weakened fashion. The urgency of a contemporary scene may modify the manner in which one writes regarding certain figures: we need readings but not the way the idler in the garden of knowledge needs them. How does one contest mutation?

This idea of mutation seems to govern Derrida’s own presentation. One can track through *Adieu* two key moves (neither innocent). Firstly, one should note the choice to use the word ‘hospitality’, which Derrida admits occurs only rarely in Levinas, but is justified ‘by ... links and discursive logic’ [*Adieu* 21]. Hospitality is described as a ‘quasi-pseudonym of welcome’ [*Adieu* 45].

Secondly, if one tries to count the number of times that Derrida makes the following gesture, one soon gets into double figures: ‘[Levinas] would not say it in this way’; ‘this is a language that is no longer literally Levinas’; ‘this is not a *theme* in his work’, ‘I would like to approach him today by way of this non-way’ etc. [*Adieu* 25, 32, 33, 48, etc.]. Derrida notes that we ought to explore patiently this particular Levinasian idiom of welcome, but this concern is interrupted by ‘fidelity to more than one memory’ [*Adieu* 45].

Thirdly, Chapter Six already noted the manner in which Derrida connects ‘hospitality’ to immigration – not a theme for Levinas.

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<sup>16</sup> Dominique Lecourt *The Mediocracy: French Philosophy since the mid-1970s* translated by Gregory Elliot (London & New York, Verso, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Critchley supports their analyses in noting two conditions for the changed reception of Levinas. 1. *Les nouveaux philosophes* return to questions of ethics, politics, law and democracy as an attack on the anti-humanism of the 1970s. 2. Levinas’ work only appears in affordable paperback editions in the mid to late 1980s. ‘Introduction’ to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, p. 3.



This idea of mutation, displacement and interruption of fidelity returns us to our earlier discussion of *bricolage* and polyphony: what disrupts the intimate encounter between Derrida and Levinas such that the replacement of welcome by hospitality is required?

The lexicon of the Other, justice and responsibility promulgated by Levinas produces effects beyond providing support for his own particular ethico-political position. This potency is excessive and can perhaps be fruitfully extended and exploited in opposition to its domestication. In offering this as a task, Derrida suggests that its possible realisation depends on a translation *to be invented* and an ethical conversion or *visitation* that 'disjoins and disturbs' [*Adieu* 62].

If there is the possibility of philosophical writing as 'stirring up' towards a new intelligibility, then it cannot simply be promulgated as a new *theory*. In order to rupture the dominant political forces, perhaps Derrida has recruited or assembled an ally in the 'community of the question', or sought to exploit a certain *appeal*; one that is manifested in changed conditions, in part wrought by the attraction of Levinas's own idiom (an attraction, which is not necessarily produced by the appreciation of the technical difficulties of that project, but which might be marked instead by an enthusiasm for a particular slogan or the possibility for recuperation into everyday good sense).

Philosophical discourse has nonphilosophical effects, viz. the fate of 'deconstruction'. Moreover, it has an ideological dimension which it is not always easy to discern. Lukács observed that the novel is privileged for revealing the ideology of his day<sup>18</sup>. Philosophy may be more so; the desire to speak of the other or a different manner of conducting philosophy away from the dominant models of refutation, truth and knowledge (*pace* Bernasconi) bespeaks more than that desire. That it is able to be generalised beneath a certain 'pluralism' may indicate even more.

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<sup>18</sup> Gyorgi Lukács *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* [1913] translated by Anna Bostock (London, Verso, 1971)



The challenge to philosophy from anthropology comes from its reducing philosophy to an object of study. Lévi-Strauss comments: 'To the anthropologist ... [philosophy] affords a first-class ethnographic document, the study of which is essential to an understanding of the mythology of our own time.'<sup>19</sup> We have already observed how Derrida resists the *total* reduction of philosophy to the field of empirical cultural studies, but this does not mean that elements of ethnography have not been taken over. As noted, the development of grammatology goes beyond the deconstructive concern with the unjustifiable valorisation of presence in logocentrism.

The determination of persisting, unthought residues of 'closed off' philosophies and philosophical practices requires a certain form of experimental precipitation – a provocative agitation. To study the 'the originary appurtenance of desire to discourse, of discourse to the history of the world, and the already-there-ness of the language in which desire deludes itself' , to think the lure or materiality of language with the always altering laws 'by which one sign gives birth to another', might require a writing that is not simply classically "philosophical" – its effects may involve a certain solicitous writing (or a solicitous level of writing that may *also be philosophical*). This would be an original and originary *irony*, serious in Hobson's sense [OL 86]<sup>20</sup>, that undercuts straightforward reading protocols given its connection to earlier theoretical developments – this would 'multiply *determinate* possibilities' for interpretation [OL 86] but would not simply be demonstrating a general meta-linguistic thesis regarding irreducible equivocation<sup>21</sup>, even if:

'... something of literature will have begun when it is not possible to decide whether, when I speak of something, I am indeed speaking of something ... or if I am giving an example, an example of something or an example of the fact that I can speak of something, of my way of speaking of something, of

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<sup>19</sup> *The Savage Mind* [1962] (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 249 footnote.

<sup>20</sup> 'The syntactic irony available at certain points in Derrida's text is not that of signals to a reader sent out by a transcending consciousness; it is much more like a sudden change of frequency in emission, which can momentarily be received in a different way and at a different place.' [OL 228]

<sup>21</sup> See the discussion of Nietzsche's fragmentary marginalia, 'I have forgotten my umbrella', in *Spurs – Nietzsche's Styles / Éperons – Les Styles de Nietzsche* translated by Barbara Harlow (Chicago & London, Chicago University Press, 1979).



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the possibility of speaking in general of something in general, or again of writing these words.' [*Passions* 142 fn.]

To risk an analogy, and one always have to beware of the nonphilosophical character of analogies, one can compare this aspect of grammatology with the activity of marine biologists (imagine a Twin Earth Derrida). If one wants to study the behaviour of sharks, one hires a boat, sails out into the ocean and drops a bucket of 'chum' into the water. Chum is a mixture of fish oil, fish entrails and blood. The pungent scent attracts predatory fish to the boat. One can then study their behaviour. If one wants to study the ideology of academic philosophy today and the way sediments of common sense folk metaphysics continue to structure its workings, then to drop Levinas into discourse is to 'chum the waters'. Discussion of Levinas is an effective way to precipitate deep-seated, neglected residues of reactionary humanism. As originally formulated, grammatology requires something like a grammatologist who in some ways operates as a field anthropologist hoping to elicit certain behaviour to better understand where we are today in the associative web of indicative signs. Philosophers could be useful objects of study as they have a tendency to express and justify their prejudices.

Derrida noted that: '*In the best of cases*, the discourse of *bricolage* can confess itself, confess in its desire and its defeat ...' [*OG* 139] Part of grammatology's historico-strategic calculations must include the assessment of when the situation pertaining to the 'best of cases' is compromised by an urgency. In the early formulations, polemically directed against the dominance of linguistics as true science of the humanities, the undermining of structuralism could possibly be felt as a real urgency. Over twenty years later in *The Politics of Friendship*, Derrida suggests that the conditions of receptivity can be such that the confessional mode, the ultra-transcendental trace, might need to be sacrificed:

'And what if tomorrow a new political wisdom were to let itself be inspired by this lie's wisdom, by this manner of knowing how to lie, dissimulate or divert wicked lucidity? What if it demanded that we know, and know how to dissimulate, the principles and forces of social unbinding, all the menacing disjunctions? to dissimulate them in order to preserve the social bond and the *Menschenfreundlichkeit*?' [*PoF* 60]



Or, in an interview with Antoine Spire, he admits it might be better sometimes to ‘simplify a little’ so that something might be allowed to happen, or pass like ‘contraband’, sometimes under the pretext of ‘never being able to get the measure of the complexity of things’<sup>22</sup>.

If one were studying the way certain signs within current academic philosophy produced or connected to others, one might not announce one’s working hypotheses or motivations. Spivak has noted that certain features of deconstruction as originally formulated have ‘gone underground’<sup>23</sup>. The explicit references to citation, ‘erasure’ and paleonymy surface only intermittently in the more recent writings, most notably in ‘*Passions*’. Much of the response to that essay has concentrated on the early comments regarding the ‘moralisation’ of deconstruction<sup>24</sup>. But few have gone on to analyse the workings of the remainder of the text, which deal both with the problem of the secret and the potentially duplicitous workings of citation. When discussing the secret and a certain form of mimesis, as it disrupts the distinction found in Kant’s *Second Critique*, Derrida writes:

‘The same words, the same grammar, can satisfy two functions. No more than in irony, and other similar things, does the difference between the two functions or the two values need to be thematised (sometimes it *must not* – and that is the secret), neither explained earnestly, nor even marked by quotation marks, visible or invisible, or other nonverbal indices.’ [*Passions* 143 fn.]

As a consequence, one might argue that an *effective* intervention in this field requires that one is read and that this general problematic be exploited for strategic purposes – to repeat, sometimes the quotation marks must not be revealed – that is the secret. When faced with the ossification into ‘a communal

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<sup>22</sup> ‘*Mais je me dis aussi que, peut-être, peut-être, il vaut mieux simplifier un peu en faisant passer quelque chose, comme en contrebande, plutôt que de se taire sous prétexte qu’on ne peut jamais être à la mesure de la complexité des choses. Il n’y a jamais de garantie, de norms de protection, d’assurance contra le risqué ainsi pris. Si cette simplification est une trahison, arrêtons-nous un peu sur ce mot de «trahison».*’ Jacques Derrida & Antoine Spire *Au-delà des Apparences* (Latresne, Bordeaux, Le Bord de l’Eau, 2002), p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Limits and Openings of Marx in Derrida’ in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London, Routledge, 1993), pp. 97–119.

<sup>24</sup> See the passage cited in the Introduction to this thesis [*Passions* 15 cited *infra* page 26].



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surety', and one who is not well-read, one may decide that citation operates as a password, a lulling into false security, a Trojan horse – it need not simply be homage.

If one were conducting investigations into the structure of intelligibility or receptivity of current academia with an eye to precipitating some modification, or preparing a translation, one might seek to mine certain sedimented tensions whilst not announcing that explicit aim. A certain 'banalisation' might be the condition of possibility for a mapping, or could one even say, a quasi-phenomenology of academic thought; certain subterranean features may need to be lured to the surface. 'Banalization' is developed by Derrida in *The Postcard*. Referring to the ordinary appearance of 'undercover', unmarked police cars, it appears in the writing of Barthes, for whom text in advertising can serve to repress certain features of an image and hence to 'banalize' the message<sup>25</sup>.

Fittingly, Barthes writes in *Mythologies*<sup>26</sup>: 'Freedom, for the critic, is not to refuse the wager (impossible!), it is to make his own wager obvious or not.' Freedom can be exercised in the extent to which one shows one workings, declares one's hand. This would elevate the problem of responsibility for one's writing to a different level; as Derrida observes in his comments on *Tristes Tropiques*, Levi Strauss's behaviour could be questioned insofar as he solicits the secret names of group members from the children of the tribe: the problematic of responsibility and urgency pertains precisely to the gathering of knowledge with respect to political potential<sup>27</sup>.

If on Austin's definition, the performative speech act is that which produces the event of which it speaks, perhaps there is a different kind of performative, which in seeking to produce events in a subtler way, shares certain features with the

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<sup>25</sup> 'Rhetoric of the Image' [1964] translated by Stephen Heath in *Image-Music-Text* edited by Stephen Heath (London, Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 32-51; p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> *Mythologies* [1957] translated Annette Lavers (London, Vintage, 1993), p. 82.

<sup>27</sup> 'The Battle of Proper Names' [*Gramm* 107-118].



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performativity of the lie<sup>28</sup>. As the lie is directed by an intention which seeks to produce an event unannounced by utterance (that is, there is a disjunction between speech act and its event), so a certain kind of writing, 'stirring up', might depend on this dissemblance. It would depend on more than the presentation of what one holds to be true and the winning of converts. One may be compelled to write at many different levels, in different registers, *obliquely*, *indirectly*.

For example, one should be attuned to the low-level conceptuality of 'Force of Law', and other essays, from this perspective of accessibility and *bricolage*. Then one could see the manner in which certain sediments of common sense are allowed to react against each other. Instead of a theoretical turn in Derrida's writing, one could instead see a change in the rhetoricity of the writings: a change in the way certain signs produce other signs – an attempt to stir up thought today.

The late essays collected in *Rogues* return to many of the earlier themes and the relation between the constative and the performative is discussed there. The constative analysis of the concept tells you 'what you are saying when you use this inherited word *democracy* ...', which may exceed the individual subject's discursive representation of it. Alternatively, one may write about democracy with the intention to 'win conviction'. Then, with respect to 'democracy to come', he introduces a further nuance: 'The *to* of the "to come" wavers between imperative injunction (call or performative) and the patient *perhaps* of messianicity (nonperformative exposure to what comes, to what can always not come or has already come).'<sup>29</sup> [*Rogues* 91] These modalities can alternate:

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<sup>28</sup> See Jacques Derrida 'History of the Lie: Prolegomena' [1994] in *Without Alibi* edited and translated by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 28-70.

<sup>29</sup> The injunction differs from the exposure to the event: 'For if there is any, if there is any such thing, the pure singular eventness of *what* arrives or of *who* arrives and arrives *to me* ... it would suppose an *irruption* that punctures the horizon, *interrupting* any performative organisation, any convention, or any context that can be dominated by conventionality. ... It is too often said that the performative produces the event of which it speaks. One must also realize that, inversely, where there is a performative, an event worthy of the name cannot arrive.' Derrida 'The future of the profession or the university without conditions (thanks to the "Humanities," what *could take place* tomorrow)' in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader* edited by Tom Cohen (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 24-57; pp. 53-54.



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‘... they can be addressed to you by turns, or else they can haunt one another, parasite one another in the same instant, each becoming by turns the alibi of the other. In saying this myself right now, in cautioning you that I can by turns or simultaneously play on the two turns of phrase, I withdraw [*je me retire*] into the secret of irony, be it irony in general or the particular rhetorical figure called irony. But here is yet one more turn, and it is political: is it not also democracy that gives the right to irony in the public space? Yes, for democracy opens public space, the publicity of public space, by granting the right to a change of tone (*Wechsel der Töne*), to irony as well as to fiction, the simulacrum, the secret, literature, and so on.’ [*Rogues* 91-2]

Do I alone hear the reference to Habermas here? Could ‘reminiscence’ and influence be governed by a *sensus communis*? The attention to the performative, the secret and the lie seem to challenge the very virtues of democratic ‘publicity’ [*Öffentlichkeit*] which determine communicative agency.

But if a certain perceived urgency might prompt a displacement of writing style, might not that same urgency suspect such writerly writing? Is it not ‘too philological, micrological, readerly - complacent, too, with the time it allows itself when matters are urgent, at just the moment when one should no longer wait. At a moment when our world is delivered over to new forms of violence, new wars, new figures of cruelty or barbarity...’ [*PoF* 78]? The considerations above would exacerbate any responsibility.

I stress that this dimension may be ineliminable from thinking through the full, continuing consequences of *Of Grammatology*, and is perhaps more challenging, more disturbing; a hovering that bespeaks more than the inability of Derrida to separate himself from Levinas. By entertaining a veiled return to *Of Grammatology*, a whole new question has been raised – what is the socio-political significance of the general ‘take-up’ of Levinas? How is it best investigated? Even if one need not debate whether this is indeed Derrida’s intention, it is undeniable that what has been precipitated by his writing has produced invaluable material for any such work of socio-cultural history.



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